

National Defense University

Digital Commons @ NDU

---

Strategic Forums

Policy Briefs

---

10-2024

## China's Forever War: What If a Taiwan Invasion Fails?

Joel Wuthnow

*Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/strategic-forums>

---

### Recommended Citation

Wuthnow, Joel, "China's Forever War: What If a Taiwan Invasion Fails?" (2024). *Strategic Forums*. 118.  
<https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/strategic-forums/118>

This Policy Brief is brought to you for free and open access by the Policy Briefs at Digital Commons @ NDU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Strategic Forums by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ NDU. For more information, please contact [joanna.seich@ndu.edu](mailto:joanna.seich@ndu.edu).

## About the Author

Dr. Joel Wuthnow is a Senior Research Fellow in the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, at the National Defense University.

## Key Points

- ◆ **A failed People's Republic of China (PRC) attempt to seize Taiwan would only be one step in a much longer conflict. Beijing will learn, rebuild, and may try again.**
- ◆ **Beijing would be more risk acceptant if its leaders face threats of removal. This could invite further escalation to quell domestic critics and reset battlefield conditions.**
- ◆ **In a post-invasion aftermath, deterrence must be quickly reestablished, but in such a way that does not imperil the PRC leadership's survival.**

## China's Forever War: What If a Taiwan Invasion Fails?

By Joel Wuthnow

As the prospects of a war across the Taiwan Strait increase, more attention is being paid to the ramifications of conflict for the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the region. Analysts have pondered what a PRC victory over Taiwan could imply for the regional military balance and the broader security architecture.<sup>1</sup> Others have calculated the economic disruptions that a war would cause for China as well as for the global economy.<sup>2</sup> Such assessments underscore the costs of conflict and thus the need to find ways to prevent war by deterring aggression.

Fewer analysts have considered the results of a failed attempt by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to seize Taiwan. U.S. policy seeks to attain a credible capability to thwart a PLA invasion if deterrence fails, but the resulting "peace," some contend, would neither be peaceful nor stable. Lonnie Henley argues that the PLA would respond to a defeat by implementing a long-term, high-intensity blockade designed to starve Taiwan into submission.<sup>3</sup> Others view political instability in China as a real possibility, with those who "lost" Taiwan "moved out in favor of a new group of leaders."<sup>4</sup> Still others believe that China would retain its military capabilities as well as the "very irredentist, aggressive leadership that started the as-yet hypothetical Taiwan war in the first place."<sup>5</sup>

Speculation about China's options after a failure to achieve its campaign objectives involves a high degree of uncertainty. Key factors that could guide PRC decisionmaking—such as how badly the PLA lost, surviving PLA capabilities, damage to the PRC civilian economy, internal cleavages among the elite, and level of popular support for the regime—are difficult or impossible to measure before the campaign begins. In such cases, it is useful to conduct an alternative futures analysis. The intent is to identify the major unknowns that would influence a decision and then construct a series of scenarios based on variation in

those factors. This yields a wider perspective on future possibilities and a sense of the policies that would be more likely to promote favored scenarios.<sup>6</sup>

This analysis explores how Beijing could act following the defeat of a cross-Strait invasion in four main sections. The first identifies key political and strategic assumptions. The second defines the most influential variables that would shape China's calculus—the extent of political vulnerability for PRC leaders and the degree of military and economic damage suffered in the invasion. The third describes four scenarios resulting from variance in those dimensions: prolonged blockade, a return to the gray zone, crisis instability, and recapitalization. The fourth assesses the policy implications, arguing that more stable futures involve fewer direct threats to the political security of the PRC regime—and that Washington, even in the context of a victory on the battlefield, should exercise caution in steps that might destabilize the Chinese leadership.

## Key Assumptions

Four key assumptions bound this analysis. The first is that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will remain intact during and after the invasion. It is plausible, and in some scenarios likely, that the individuals who ordered the campaign would be at risk of removal, but the Party's resilience, combined with the lack of a credible political alternative and the need for a strong institution to manage the country's rebuilding, means that the probability of a regime change is low.

The second assumption is that the Party's fundamental political aims toward Taiwan will not change.<sup>7</sup> This means a continued commitment both to deterring Taiwan independence and eventually controlling the island. An immediate problem for the CCP would be deterring any steps that leaders in Taipei might make toward *de jure* independence—which could be a result of an aggrieved, emboldened, or even triumphalist Taiwan leadership backed by international support, including from a mobilized U.S. political system. PRC deterrence efforts could entail a continuation of coercive activities

such as maritime interdiction, missile or artillery bombardment, or cyber warfare. The Party would also rebuild the capability to launch another invasion as soon as possible, although its ability to focus on this priority varies across scenarios.

A third assumption is that the CCP would not explicitly acknowledge defeat or negotiate a formal war termination agreement (indeed, the “war” might continue through other forms of coercion). In every scenario, Party officials would seek to conceal the full extent of the damage suffered by the PLA from the public and from China's foreign rivals and domestic separatist groups, who might be assumed to take advantage of the situation. If CCP leaders must explain the outcome, they would frame it in the most favorable light. This could mean that they claim they had “taught a lesson” to independence forces in Taipei (and deny that their war aim was to control the island) or focus on the veneration of military heroes and martyrs.<sup>8</sup> Chinese elites and the public, however, would have some ability to decide for themselves whether the official narrative is credible and who is to blame.

Finally, it could be assumed that Taiwan and the United States, whose active participation in the conflict was necessary to thwart the invasion, would have suffered major losses as well.<sup>9</sup> This could include heavy casualties and the loss of key weapons, platforms, and munitions. Civilian infrastructure in Taiwan, such as ports, airports, and communications systems, would be damaged or inoperable for some time. Depending on how China attempts to prevent U.S. participation, the United States (and possibly Japan) might also be recovering from damage to satellites, communications networks, and bases across the Western Pacific. Sanctions against China would remain in place, but from a military perspective, the CCP would have opportunities to begin to recover soon after the failed campaign.

## Critical Variables

Alternative futures analysis requires a distillation of the primary unknowns that would shape the outcome.

Although Chinese decisionmakers would operate in a highly dynamic and complex environment during and after the war—faced with myriad political, economic, diplomatic, and military challenges—their fundamental calculus would be influenced most strongly by political vulnerability of the leadership and the amount of damage suffered by the country and the PLA.

**Extent of Political Vulnerability.** A confident and unified party leadership, even after a military defeat, would have different political incentives and imperatives than one that is weakened and therefore at risk of removal. Political vulnerability could be influenced by the extent of power consolidation by the top leader before the war began; popularity of the leader among a domestic audience (unpopular leaders could be branded as national traitors by a public that had been mobilized for victory);<sup>10</sup> fractures between different elite interest groups, and between civilians and military leaders; the leadership's ability to spin the results of the war to limit domestic criticism; level of support from foreign counterparts; and the availability of scapegoats on whom to fix the blame for poor results, such as senior PLA officers.

Political vulnerability can be measured from low to high. A more fragile and divided CCP leadership could be more risk acceptant, as explained in the political science logic of “gambling for resurrection”—leaders who face removal sometimes place large bets even in a losing war.<sup>11</sup> They may perceive that inflicting further damage on the adversary, including punitive moves that would impose costs but not allow the PLA to achieve its original ambition to seize the island, would be necessary to deflect internal criticism, reset battlefield conditions, or compel negotiations on a more favorable basis. This supposition is also supported by scholarship that has found that autocratic leaders who conclude disastrous wars are likely to be severely punished and that wars initiated by dictators are likely to last much longer than those by democracies, due in part to the political costs of ending the conflict without a clear victory.<sup>12</sup> A leadership that survives the war and maintains internal unity would have

more freedom to pivot to domestic rebuilding, even if this requires a full cessation of military operations.

**Severity of Damage.** PRC decisions would also be shaped by the military and civilian damage sustained in the invasion. Militarily, this variable can be measured as percentages of major combat platforms disabled or destroyed (for instance, did U.S. forces sink a large portion of the PLA Navy surface fleet after the invasion began?);<sup>13</sup> percentages of strategic resources such as critical munitions and oil stockpiles exhausted; percentages of senior officers and elite fighters killed;<sup>14</sup> and damage to critical military infrastructure, such as logistics, C4ISR systems, bases, ports, and headquarters. There would also be varying levels of damage to the civilian economy, which would be influenced by the resilience of the economy prior to the war and China's ability to weather international sanctions and retain or potentially regain access to foreign markets.

Levels of destruction can be aggregated into a scale ranging from minor to severe. Lesser damage would provide Party leaders more extensive options to continue offensive military operations in some other form, such as a prolonged blockade, and would reduce the costs of recapitalizing China's conventional forces. Conversely, more severe destruction would increase the costs and time required to rebuild the PLA given production rates for platforms and advanced munitions. Heavy losses to conventional forces would also increase the relative utility of relying on untapped strategic capabilities, including theater-level nuclear weapons, in some scenarios.

There is likely some correlation between the two variables: everything else being equal, the heavier the losses, the harder it would be for the CCP to conceal the damage and the greater the potential for divisions within the elite. However, the variables do not *necessarily* correlate with each other. Heavier damage could prompt a rally-around-the-flag effect that strengthens the political capital of the top leaders. Moreover, high casualties overseas do not necessarily imply that the Party would lose control of domestic information, which would still be manipulated to distort the outcome, thus relieving

political pressure on the regime and reducing the chances of a risk acceptance policy.

## Four Scenarios

Intersecting the two critical variables onto a 2x2 matrix, as prescribed by the alternative futures technique, yields four scenarios (see table). This section discusses each in turn.

**Prolonged Blockade** (*High Political Vulnerability, Low Damage*). In this scenario, the CCP elite has been humiliated and its top leader—reeling from the setback and on shaky political ground at home—decides that there is a political necessity to inflict further punishment on Taiwan, even if this does not bring Taipei to the negotiating table or otherwise improve the Party’s chances of achieving its battlefield objectives. While the invasion failed, the PLA suffered only minor losses (perhaps turning its main forces around before heavy casualties were sustained) and therefore has the requisite critical munitions, platforms, and fighters on hand to continue other major operations.<sup>15</sup>

PLA forces have retreated behind the relative security of China’s integrated air and missile defenses but still threaten any ships attempting to resupply Taiwan’s functioning ports with land- or air-launched antiship missiles.

The PLA also ramps up cyberattacks against port facilities and other critical infrastructure. These attacks do not convince Taipei to come to the negotiating table, but over the course of several weeks, prove sufficient to relieve political pressure on the CCP leadership, which points to these attacks as a “lesson” that has been “taught” to pro-independence forces on Taiwan and their foreign backers.

Although the blockade continues beyond the landing campaign, its utility diminishes as soon as political security has been restored to CCP leadership. Since China accepts mounting economic costs for the duration of the blockade, it does not last indefinitely, as is the case in Henley’s depiction. There is eventually a pivot back to gray zone operations and recapitalization of the force.<sup>16</sup>

**Return to the Gray Zone** (*Low Political Vulnerability, Low Damage*). Going into the invasion, the top CCP leader was much more firmly in charge than in the previous scenario. Beijing conducted a successful information blackout that prevented most members of the public and some elites from understanding that the PLA had failed to achieve its operational goals. Successful control of the information environment was facilitated by relatively small numbers of casualties and damaged or destroyed equipment.

**Table. Four Post-Invasion Scenarios**

		Severity of Defeat	
		High	Low
Scale of Conflict	High	<p><b>Prolonged Blockade</b> High intensity blockade continues until political risks have abated.</p>	<p><b>Crisis Instability</b> Temptations for demonstration or limited use of strategic capabilities, including theater nuclear weapons.</p>
	Low	<p><b>Return to the Gray Zone</b> Resumption of air, maritime, cyber campaign; forces recapitalized as needed.</p>	<p><b>Recapitalization</b> Increased mobilization focuses on reconstituting platforms, material, and fighters; regional deterrence.</p>

Without the political need to accept high levels of risk—and understanding that another invasion would likely fail and judging that continued major combat operations would extend an international sanctions regime—the PLA shifts back to an emphasis on coercive but nonkinetic operations. Seaborne supplies are allowed to reach Taiwan, although periodic maritime “inspections” interdict some shipments.<sup>17</sup> The PLA also conducts large-scale cyberattacks and incursions into airspace near Taiwan, likely with fighters approaching far closer than they had prior to the invasion. These activities are calibrated to signal China’s willingness not only to escalate if Taiwan exploits a moment of outrage against the mainland to press for independence but also to avoid thresholds that would trigger sanctions as well as cause further attrition to PLA forces.

***Crisis Instability*** (*High Political Vulnerability, High Damage*). In this scenario, the CCP leadership has fractured over the leader’s decision to launch the invasion, with some expressing support despite the results and others harboring grievances. The scale of the damage means that media censors have not been able to prevent details about the PLA’s defeat to reach ordinary citizens, some of whom portray the decision as another strategic failure, along with mishandling of the economy and zero-COVID-19 restrictions, which have brought shame on the country. A few protestors have taken their outrage to the streets, causing alarm in Beijing even if internal security forces quickly address the situation. Still, dissatisfied elites and public opinion further back the leader into a corner.

High levels of attrition during the invasion have also left the PLA short of skilled troops, combat aircraft, surface ships, and critical munitions, which limits the leadership’s options to stage a blockade or firestrike campaign. Fearing removal, and increasingly isolated and subject to advice from fanatical military advisors, the leader weighs unconventional options to restore political security and to create enough of a shock that Taiwan and the United States must reconsider their decisions not to

negotiate a truce on China’s terms. Any triumphalism after the defeat of the PLA invasion would be short-lived.

Greater consideration of the potential value of using strategic capabilities, however, does not mean that the CCP regime becomes suicidal. They are looking for game-changing moves that would send a strong signal of resolve, but not invite a preemptive or retaliatory strike against the mainland. China’s leadership would thus actively consider steps such as a reversible antisatellite attack, a high-altitude electromagnetic pulse, or launching a theater-range nuclear weapon into the open ocean as a demonstration. Nevertheless, the crisis becomes unstable as opponents are unable to gauge China’s intentions. There is some recognition in Beijing and Washington that crisis communications tools would be useful in avoiding unintentional escalation, but the political optics of negotiating an off-ramp with the United States are too high, and no communications take place.<sup>18</sup>

***Recapitalization*** (*Low Political Vulnerability, High Damage*). Despite, or perhaps because of, heavy casualties, the CCP remains highly unified, and there is no risk of removal for the top leader. A rally-around-the-flag effect has occurred as citizens learn about the heroic acts of martyred PLA soldiers but do not pressure the leadership for further aggression. They are satisfied with the official narrative that Taiwan’s independence forces have been taught a lesson. Any blame is shifted to a few corrupt PLA generals who exercised poor judgment and did not carry out instructions handed down from the Central Military Commission.

Nevertheless, PLA readiness has been significantly lowered by attrition. Another invasion attempt cannot be considered until weapons stockpiles are replenished and key platforms repaired or new units manufactured. The PLA must also embark on a process of evaluation and self-reflection to identify the causes of the failure, which produces not only organizational and doctrinal adjustments but also catalyzes reforms in how the PLA selects and promotes officers. The war stimulates a higher level of “jointness,” providing China with something close to a Goldwater-Nichols moment. The PLA eventually



emerges as a stronger and more modern force, but this takes time.

For the immediate future, remaining combat-ready PLA capabilities are distributed around China's borders and coastal regions to deter adventurism by opponents such as the United States, as well as Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and India (who may still exploit China's defeat to press their own territorial ambitions).<sup>19</sup> Internal security forces also remain on high alert in this and other scenarios for signs of domestic turmoil. Limited coercive operations are conducted around Taiwan, but these are mostly symbolic. The overriding goal for the regime is to reconstitute a credible warfighting capability.

## Policy Considerations

There is no scenario in which China, following an unsuccessful invasion, accepts responsibility, acknowledges that military solutions are impractical, or pivots to a fundamentally different set of political objectives toward Taiwan. It is highly doubtful that there will be a revolt among the elite toward those seeking rapprochement with the island, much less the United States. The top leader might be ousted, but the Party as a governing institution would survive; its new leaders would be selected from candidates who promise not to allow any further humiliations of the CCP at home or abroad.

Nevertheless, from a U.S., Taiwan, and allied perspective, some scenarios offer a greater prospect of *relative* peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region than others. The best-case scenario is *recapitalization* because China's leaders lack extensive military options to execute continued offensive operations against Taiwan but, more important, do not have the internal political necessity to do so. They could afford to focus on restoring the PLA as a credible warfighting instrument, which could not only revive a similar threat in the future but also allow time for China's opponents to restock their own inventories and conduct their own assessments of where the PLA, which has now been tested in battle, is weakest. Learning would take place on both sides, and the side that could

most effectively adapt based on the lessons from the conflict would gain a future advantage.

This is also the scenario most likely to feature a return to some type of normal Sino-U.S. relationship, although achieving such an end would be a tall political order in the short and medium terms given the deep animosity toward the PRC that would persist in the United States. China would also attempt to break free from international isolation in Europe and among industrialized Asian democracies, which would gradually relax sanctions based on their long-term economic interests. However, Beijing's impetus to stabilize relations with major powers could provide some leverage for the United States to influence PRC choices.

The next best scenario would be *return to the gray zone*. Major combat operations have been suspended, although Taiwan continues to face major threats to its sea lines, territorial airspace, and information systems. Taipei could expect that the PLA would not return to the status quo ante but would integrate new forms of coercion—such as flying in closer proximity to Taiwan—into the mix. However, the CCP has latitude to avoid further escalations above the level of lethal violence and would focus on rebuilding both its military capabilities and an economy that has been battered by sanctions and trade disruptions, rather than reattacking in the near term. This would give Taiwan and its partners an opportunity to rebuild their own forces and reestablish deterrence.

The two other scenarios involve a much higher degree of risk of further destruction and escalation. In a *prolonged blockade*, Taiwan would face continued isolation that threatens a social and economic crisis, which would relent only when China's leaders conclude that political security has been attained and that the costs to their own interests from ongoing sanctions outweigh those political benefits. More worrisome, the *crisis instability* scenario entails a risk of escalation into outer space—if China did not already attack U.S. space assets in the invasion—or even into the nuclear realm (although actual nuclear use would not be a preferred choice). Lack of effective crisis communications mechanisms, combined

with the political disincentives in Beijing to be seen to be negotiating off-ramps, increase the possibilities of an accident or miscalculation.

A goal for U.S. strategy should be, first, to ensure—if deterrence fails and China launches an invasion—that the PLA fails; second, to quickly reestablish deterrence by maintaining credible military forces in the region (which could require substantial redeployment and reconstitution of U.S. forces); and third, to create conditions for a relaxation of tensions rather than further PRC escalation. Politically, a return to normal U.S.-China relations, including stable trade relations and a full relaxation of U.S.-led sanctions, would not be a feasible outcome in the immediate aftermath but could be envisioned once deterrence is reestablished and the atmosphere has begun to relax.

The key lesson from this analysis is that U.S. policy should *not box the CCP leadership into a corner* if its military plans fail. Politically, CCP leaders would need room to maneuver out of a bad situation in a way that does not entail further escalation. Possible ways to accomplish this goal would include:

- ◆ avoiding calls for regime change, which would not actually produce a new regime more acceptable to U.S. interests due to the institutional resilience of the CCP, but which would create added pressure on the party to resist calls for deescalation

- ◆ not undermining the CCP domestic narrative that it had taught Taiwan a lesson, even if PLA forces have been badly defeated

- ◆ eschewing unrealistically expansive reparations demands, which the CCP would never agree to, but which would increase pressure on the top leader to respond forcefully (perhaps recreating the nationalist outcry that followed the humiliation of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles)

- ◆ discouraging Taiwan from using the moment of PRC military defeat to revise the constitution, hold a referendum on independence, or otherwise take steps toward independence, which would add pressure on the CCP to escalate

- ◆ considering discussions such as prisoner exchanges or return of bodies that would lower the political temperature, along with negotiations on conditions under which broad economic sanctions could be relaxed (presumably, sanctions against the individuals who ordered the invasion would persist regardless of the scenario)

- ◆ avoiding information campaigns that would reduce the CCP's ability to convince the people that the Party has not been humiliated; pressure could build on new leaders to exact vengeance.

Such actions are complicated because they risk being interpreted as signs of weakness against an adversary that has just launched an unprovoked invasion against a vulnerable neighbor, with all the losses to Taiwan and U.S. forces that the invasion attempt would have entailed. To be sure, an extremely high degree of military pressure should be sustained against Beijing. This could include new steps, such as organizing a multilateral defense coalition to preserve Taiwan's autonomy or even stationing U.S. troops on the island. But this is not enough to influence PRC decisions in the preferred direction. It also must be considered that even to withdraw its forces and withhold further attacks—which would accord with its basic preference to recover—Beijing would need decision space afforded by political security. Striking a balance between strengthening deterrence, imposing costs, and reducing pressure on China to persist with aggression perceived to be politically necessary should be part of the overall policy framework.

## Conclusion

It would be foolish to assume that simply defeating the PLA on the battlefield would be sufficient for a durable peace to be achieved across the Taiwan Strait. A failure would result in learning, recapitalization, and further attempts to coerce the island's leaders or, if possible, seize it in a future war. However, there should be greater consideration of the ways in which Beijing's temptations to escalate following defeat, rather than retreating to a more inward focus, could be reduced. Otherwise, any



operational success attained over the PLA would prove, perhaps in the weeks and months following the failure, to be a Pyrrhic victory.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge, “Then What? Assessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan,” *International Security* 47, no. 1 (Summer 2022), 7–45; David Santoro and Ralph Cossa, eds., *The World After Taiwan’s Fall* (Honolulu: Pacific Forum, February 2023); Andrew S. Erickson, Gabriel B. Collins, and Matt Pottinger, “The Taiwan Catastrophe,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 16, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Charlie Vest, Agatha Kratz, and Reva Goujon, “The Global Economic Disruptions From a Taiwan Conflict,” Rhodium Group, December 14, 2022; Jude Blanchette and Gerard DiPippo, “Reunification” *With Taiwan Through Force Would Be a Pyrrhic Victory for China*, CSIS Briefs (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], November 22, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Lonnie D. Henley, *Beyond the First Battle: Overcoming a Protracted Blockade of Taiwan*, China Maritime Report No. 26 (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, March 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth W. Allen and Brendan S. Mulvaney, “The Day After the Battle,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 4, no. 1 (December 2020), 269–274.

<sup>5</sup> Connor Swank, “Suppose the U.S. Defeats a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan. What Then?” *The Diplomat*, December 10, 2022. See also Wang Mouzhou, “What Happens After China Invades Taiwan?” *The Diplomat*, March 24, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/what-happens-after-china-invades-taiwan/>.

<sup>6</sup> *A Tradecraft Primer: Structured Analytic Techniques for Improving Intelligence Analysis* (Langley, VA: Central Intelligence Agency, March 2009), 34–36.

<sup>7</sup> Richard C. Bush, *Untying the Knot: Making Peace in the Taiwan Strait* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 81–106.

<sup>8</sup> This references Deng Xiaoping’s assertion that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)’s aim in its 1979 invasion of Vietnam was to “teach a lesson” to its southern neighbor for Hanoi’s invasion of Cambodia the year before. Success of this gambit would rest on ability to conceal the true aim of the invasion, which would be difficult at best after the invasion began.

<sup>9</sup> Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan* (Washington, DC: CSIS, January 2023), 142–144.

<sup>10</sup> As Thomas Christensen argues, the Party is “extremely sensitive to criticism” and has been worried about accusations of leaders selling

out to foreign interests: “This trend is of great concern to the CCP elite, partially because nationalist themes would be easy ones around which currently disparate opposition forces could quickly come together and perhaps join disaffected hardline nationalists in the Party, including military personnel.” Presumably, those sensitivities would be even more acute for a leader following a military debacle with Taiwan. See Thomas J. Christensen, “Posing Problems Without Catching Up: China’s Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy,” *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001), 15.

<sup>11</sup> George W. Downs and David M. Rocke, “Conflict, Agency, and Gambling for Resurrection: The Principal-Agent Problem Goes to War,” *American Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 2 (May 1994), 362–380; Shawn T. Cochran, “Gambling for Resurrection Versus Bleeding the Army: Explaining Risky Behavior in Failing Wars,” *Security Studies* 27, no. 2 (2018), 204–232.

<sup>12</sup> D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam III, “The Duration of Interstate Wars, 1816–1985,” *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 2 (June 1996), 239–257; H.E. Goemans, “Fighting for Survival: The Fate of Leaders and the Duration of War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 5 (October 2000), 555–579.

<sup>13</sup> Michèle A. Flournoy, “How to Prevent a War in Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 18, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, if the PLA sustained heavy losses to elite special operations forces capabilities, its ability to launch another invasion would be much slower given the training that would need to be conducted to reconstitute those forces.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the PLA’s canonical cross-Strait campaigns, see Michael Casey, “Firepower Strike, Blockade, Landing: PLA Campaigns for a Cross-Strait Conflict,” in *Crossing the Strait: China’s Military Prepares for War with Taiwan*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2022), 113–138.

<sup>16</sup> Henley, *Beyond the First Battle*.

<sup>17</sup> Bonny Lin et al., *How China Could Quarantine Taiwan: Mapping Out Two Possible Scenarios*, CSIS Briefs (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2024), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-china-could-quarantine-taiwan-mapping-out-two-possible-scenarios>. The analysis considers quasi-blockade scenarios in lieu of an invasion, but such options would also persist after a failed invasion to maintain pressure on Taiwan while avoiding higher levels of escalation.

<sup>18</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro, *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> PLA sources often refer to this phenomenon as “chain reaction warfare” [连锁反应战争]. Fears of opportunism by other antagonists are likely before, during, and after major combat operations in the main theater.

## INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs (CSCMA) within the Institute for National Strategic Studies serves as a national focal point and resource center for multidisciplinary research and analytic exchanges on the national goals and strategic posture of the People’s Republic of China. The center focuses on China’s ability to develop, field, and deploy an effective military instrument in support of its national strategic objectives.



The Strategic Forum series presents original research by members of NDU as well as other scholars and specialists in national security affairs from the United States and abroad. The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Defense Department or any other agency of the Federal Government. Visit NDU Press online at [ndupress.ndu.edu](http://ndupress.ndu.edu).

Phillip C. Saunders  
Director  
CSCMA

Denise Natali  
Director  
INSS

William T. Elason  
Director  
NDU Press