

The Big Read **Taiwan**

## Taiwan: preparing for a potential Chinese invasion

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Xi Jinping's ambitions and the modernisation of China's military are prompting growing fears about an attempt to annex the island

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When Joe Biden pledged last month to intervene militarily if China were ever to attack Taiwan, his comment was met with a harsh response from Beijing.

“If the US continues to go down the wrong path,” a foreign ministry spokesperson said, “the US will have to pay an unbearable price.”

The phrase was widely read as a warning about war. The same day, China and Russia flew a joint nuclear bomber exercise near Japan.

The exchange was the latest in a spiral of martial messaging between the US and China. It was also a reflection of the mounting fears in Washington, Taipei and among US allies that Beijing could try to annex [Taiwan](#) in the next few years.

“This is the decade of concern, particularly the period between now and 2027,” says Phil Davidson, a retired admiral who commanded US forces in the Indo-Pacific until last year. “I make that assessment because of the staggering improvements in [Chinese military](#) capabilities and capacities, the political timeline for Xi Jinping and the long-range economic challenges in China’s future.”



Taipei wants to retain military capabilities, such as its F-5 fighter jets, to counter Chinese incursions © Ritchie B Tongo/EPA-EFE

Although China's threat to seize Taiwan by force has been in place ever since the Chinese Nationalist government and army fled to Taiwan in 1949 after losing the civil war on the mainland, Beijing had long focused on pulling the island into its fold with economic lure and political pressure.

But many Taiwanese policymakers now believe that as the Chinese Communist party loses hope these measures will ever work and with its armed forces modernising rapidly, Xi might opt for war soon.

Taiwan came into renewed focus as an increasingly dangerous flashpoint just days after Biden's inauguration last year when Chinese warplanes simulated missile attacks on a US aircraft carrier sailing in the vicinity of the country. Over the following months, China then boosted the tempo and size of fighter jet and bomber sorties near Taiwan.

Davidson sounded the alarm in March last year, telling the Senate armed services committee that he believed the threat of a Chinese attack on Taiwan would "manifest . . . in the next six years". Shortly thereafter, a senior US official told the Financial Times that Xi was flirting with the idea of seizing control.

Since then such warnings have become more widespread — the background to Biden's comments about responding to a Chinese invasion. It has also accelerated a shift in the conversation between Taiwan and the US over how to defend the island.

Although Washington has been urging Taipei for years to take that risk more seriously, the Taiwanese government and military were slow to respond. But the war in Ukraine has served as a wake-up call. Senior Taiwanese officials say Russia's assault on its neighbour has highlighted the threat they face.





Phil Davidson, former US Indo-Pacific Commander, believes the threat of a Chinese attack on Taiwan will manifest by 2027 © Hugh Gentry/Reuters

“The danger comes from Xi Jinping and the fact that he will begin a third term later this year,” says one official. “Under China’s previous process where they would have a new leader every 10 years, their ‘historic mission’ of unifying Taiwan could be passed on to the next leader. But when a national mission becomes one man’s mission, the danger rises.”

“Putin would not have made a decision like this to invade Ukraine if he wasn’t deciding everything by himself. So Xi Jinping could well make this kind of misjudgement as well,” the official adds.

## A shift from ambiguity

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine has focused attention on the potential threat to Taiwan, there is one big difference between the two situations: a Chinese war on Taiwan could be a war with the US.

When Washington switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979, it replaced its mutual defence treaty with Taiwan with the Taiwan Relations Act. The law requires the US to give the country the weapons needed to defend itself, and to maintain the US’s own capacity to resist force or coercion that would jeopardise Taiwan’s security.

In the past, the US kept it ambiguous how far that commitment went. In an attempt to both deter Beijing from considering military force and discourage Taipei from formalising its independence, Washington declined to spell out whether it would enter a war between the two.

Biden appears to have drastically reduced that ambiguity. Asked by a reporter during his recent trip to Japan if he was willing to [use force to defend Taiwan](#), he said: “Yes. That is the commitment we made.” The White House hurried to stress — as it did after Biden’s previous similar statements which some analysts viewed as gaffes — that



US policy towards Taiwan has not changed.



President Joe Biden, during a recent trip to Japan, told a reporter he was willing to use force to defend Taiwan © Eugene Hoshiko/Pool/EPA-EFE

But senior officials in Taiwan and countries allied with the US believe Biden is trying to deter Beijing by signalling more clearly it might have to fight the US, too. “We think Biden has made a political decision to demonstrate that this option cannot be excluded,” says a senior Taiwanese official.

“In the Ukraine case, he said beforehand that the US would not enter the war. But when China feels that their military capability has reached the level ready for taking Taiwan, just using financial or economic sanctions will not create an effective deterrence,” he says. “So you must absolutely not let China believe that you will not take military action.”

Although there is growing concern about a possible invasion, the timeframe of any military action — and China’s real intentions — are still the subject of intense debate.

The year Davidson sees as the potential time horizon for a Chinese attack, 2027, is the centenary of the People’s Liberation Army. In November 2020, the Chinese Communist party said it wanted to “ensure that the 100-year military building goal is achieved by 2027”, called for faster military modernisation and reiterated the goal of making the Chinese military fit for networked, “intelligentised” warfare.

Although those are stock phrases China has used before, the Pentagon calls 2027 a “new milestone”. “If realised, the PLA’s 2027 modernisation goals could provide Beijing with more credible military options in a Taiwan contingency,” it said in its annual report on the Chinese military last year.

Some analysts doubt Davidson’s date. But one year on from his testimony, government and military officials in both Taipei and Washington say the window from now to 2027 is a genuine threat.



Avril Haines, director of national intelligence, told Congress the threat to Taiwan was ‘acute’ between now and 2030 © Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

Last October, Taiwan’s defence minister Chiu Kuo-cheng said the PLA would have the “complete capability” to attack Taiwan by 2025. “The current situation is really the most dangerous I have seen in my more than 40 years in the military,” he told lawmakers.

Avril Haines, the US director of national intelligence, recently told Congress that the threat to Taiwan was “acute” between now and 2030 — lending credence to Davidson’s sense of urgency. John Aquilino, the current head of Indo-Pacific command, recently told the FT that the invasion of Ukraine underscored that the Chinese threat to Taiwan was not abstract.

Taiwanese experts see 2024 and 2025 as a particularly dangerous period. They believe Xi might be tempted to use force if the ruling Democratic Progressive party, which insists on preserving Taiwan's de facto independence, wins again in the next presidential election in early 2024, or if he senses a political vacuum in the US after its next presidential election in late 2024.

Mackenzie Eaglen, a defence expert at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think-tank, says there are two camps when it comes to the timing of a possible Chinese attack on Taiwan.

“This is about those who believe in the Davidson window — the time of maximum danger — versus those [ . . . ] who believe we have time to acquire the capabilities that will deter and defeat China at some future date,” says Eaglen. She adds that the Pentagon leadership is “trying to thread the needle of agreeing that there is some concern now while putting the emphasis on the medium term”.

One person familiar with the administration's assessment of the threat to Taiwan says there is general agreement that China is aiming to have developed the necessary capabilities to attack by 2027, but argues that is very distinct from the question of intent or action.

“I don't think a decision has been taken [by China] to do anything on any timeline other than to have certain capabilities. I think that gets lost in the debate about a date or timeline,” she says.

## Preparing for the worst

The growing anxiety about a potential Chinese invasion is reshaping the way Washington and Taipei think about defending the country.

Washington has been trying for more than a decade to convince Taiwan to “harden” itself against a Chinese invasion. But the country's military kept planning under the assumption that it had more time to prepare or might not have to deal with a full-scale invasion.

Many Taiwanese defence experts see that as a worst-case scenario but they worry that Chinese military moves short of war, such as Beijing's frequent air and sea exercises close to Taiwan, information warfare or maybe even a sea blockade, could undermine the country's determination to resist. Taipei therefore wants to also retain military capabilities needed to counter those moves, such as surface ships, modern fighters and early warning aircraft



and early warning aircraft.

But now that the US is increasingly focused on a near-term threat of invasion, it is [forcing Taipei's hand](#): the administration has begun to deny Taiwanese requests for large weapons such as anti-submarine warfare helicopters, which it believes could be quickly destroyed in a Chinese assault and use up too many valuable resources.

Instead, the US is pushing for an increased focus on small, relatively cheap and survivable weapons such as mobile missiles, which would be of use only in fighting back a Chinese attempt at invasion and occupation.



President Tsai Ing-wen visits army reservists on exercises. The undertrained force has to be reformed to provide resilience against an attack by China © Ann Wang/Reuters

The Taiwanese government has also been jolted into action by the additional perspective provided by the Ukraine war.

Senior officials say the government of president Tsai Ing-wen is now laser-focused on making the country more resilient to resist a Chinese attack. Premier Su Tseng-chang has pledged support for extending basic military service from the current four months to a year, as well as raising the military budget, so far at an average of only 2 per cent of gross domestic product.

“We are indeed in the midst of very large-scale and thorough discussions both among ourselves and with the Americans right now about the things we need to do.” says one



ourselves and with the Americans right now about the things we need to do," says one person familiar with the situation. "We are exploring a range of radically different ideas for making our country resilient, to build the features we need in wartime."

The policies under consideration include faster and more decisive reform of Taiwan's undertrained reserve force; building distributed power and communications systems, which Chinese cyber and missile attacks could not knock out; hardening command and control systems; planning for basic goods supplies in wartime; and assigning administrative responsibilities for civil defence. The senior official says: "Our goal is to be ready between 2025 and 2027."

## Chinese modernisation

There is plenty of evidence from publicly available sources that the PLA is single-mindedly pursuing the capabilities needed to launch an invasion.

One is finding and targeting submarines that could attack Chinese naval vessels transporting invasion troops across the Strait. Of the 1,543 aircraft the PLA has flown into Taiwan's air defence identification zone since September 2020, 262, the second-largest group, were anti-submarine warfare aircraft. The ADIZ is a buffer zone in international airspace watched for early-warning purposes.

In April 2021, the PLA Navy's first Type 075 landing helicopter dock, a large amphibious assault ship that can carry helicopters and troops, went into service. Two more have already started sea trials.

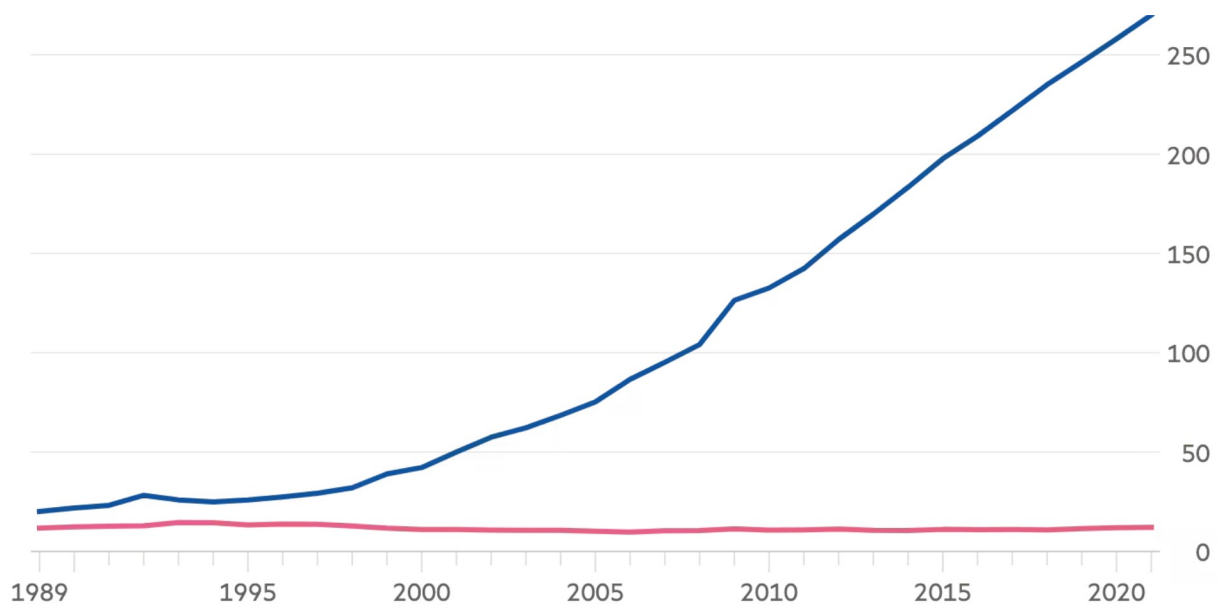
That leaves the force still far short of its required transport capacity, but it plans on using civilian ferries, barges and floating ramps to bring troops to shore even without access to a port, according to writings by researchers at the PLA's Military Transportation University.

Using reports on the military channel of China's state television and satellite photos, Michael Dahm, a retired US Navy intelligence officer and researcher at the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, analysed two related exercises in the summer of 2020 and 2021. He believes the PLA is developing plans to mobilise maritime shipping "on a massive scale".

### China greatly outspends Taiwan

Military expenditure, by country (\$bn)\*

— China — Taiwan



\*At constant 2020 prices, except for the last figure which is at 2021 prices and exchange rates

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“Such a mobilisation of civilian shipping to support cross-strait operations may be very high risk and could involve extremely high losses,” he wrote in a paper last year. “[But] there are few challenges related to efficiency and attrition that the Chinese military could not simply address with overwhelming mass and a tolerance for loss.”

Some analysts believe that a Taiwan invasion will still remain a considerable challenge for the PLA for years to come — a fact they believe has been highlighted by Russia’s struggles in a war operation in much less complex circumstances.

“What [the PLA] wants to do in their high-end scenario is far more complicated than what Russia is trying to do in Ukraine. What Russia is trying to do is the easiest, and what China would be trying to do is the hardest in terms of conquest scenarios in general,” says Taylor Fravel, director of the Security Studies Program at MIT and an expert in Chinese military strategy. “Thus, observing Russia’s difficulties conducting relatively simple operations, China’s leaders may wonder about the PLA’s ability to carry out much more complex operations, which may make them more cautious about launching such an attack for the time being.”

Su Tzu-yun, an associate research fellow at the Institute for National Defence and Security Research, a think-tank backed by Taiwan’s defence ministry, argues that no matter what steps the PLA takes, it still needs to send ships across the Strait. “In Ukraine, we have seen Russian vehicles trapped on the highway. In the Taiwan scenario, the sea is your highway,” Su says. “So that is the time and place to destroy them.”

Yet while China's ability to actually conduct an invasion remains unclear, the Chinese armed forces' rapid modernisation has put its potential adversaries on the back foot.



The PLA Navy, which is still far short of the transport capacity required to mount an invasion, will need to enlist civilian vessels © David Wong/South China Morning Post/Getty Images

“China is on a trajectory of investment. If the US continues the status quo in its approach to defence investments, the gap between the two is going to be such that the timeline will accelerate in that window,” Davidson says.

That imbalance could make the situation even more dangerous. A Taiwanese military official says the US plans to strengthen its posture in the Indo-Pacific, such as building a more mobile force of Marines and putting Chinese ships at risk with missiles on allied-controlled islands, will require several years. “We have concerns that the Chinese Communists could think that striking earlier is better — before we and the US are ready,” he says.

Some analysts argue that watching Russia struggle in Ukraine may also demonstrate to Beijing the importance of moving fast. “Politically, if China's leaders believe that the United States has or will extend an unconditional security commitment to Taiwan, then the value for China of taking some kind of military action to demonstrate China's resolve and willingness to resist the United States is much greater than before,” Fravel says.

Some Taiwan politicians think that the US's increasingly bitter competition with China is adding to the risk. Eric Chu, chair of the Kuomintang opposition party, told a think-tank audience in Washington on Monday that he hoped US attention would not cause "trouble" in Asia. "I do appreciate any kind of help from the US," Chu said. "But hopefully the tension can [ease in] the coming years."

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