

US-China relations

US Navy Seal unit that killed Osama bin Laden trains for China invasion of Taiwan

Elite commando team makes plans to help island nation in event Beijing launches war



Seal Team 6 has been planning and training for a Taiwan conflict for more than a year at its headquarters at Virginia Beach, according to people familiar with the preparations © FT montage/Alamy

Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington YESTERDAY

Seal Team 6, the clandestine US Navy commando unit that killed Osama bin Laden in 2011, has been training for missions to help Taiwan if it is invaded by China, according to people familiar with the preparations.

The elite Navy special forces team, which is tasked with some of the military's most sensitive and difficult missions, has been planning and training for a [Taiwan](#) conflict for more than a year at Dam Neck, its headquarters at Virginia Beach about 250km south-east of Washington.

The secret training underlines the increased US focus on deterring [China](#) from attacking Taiwan, while stepping up preparations for such an event.

The preparations have only grown since Phil Davidson, the US Indo-Pacific commander at the time, warned in 2021 that China could [attack Taiwan within six years](#).

While US officials stress that conflict with China is “neither imminent nor inevitable”, the US military has accelerated contingency preparations as the People's Liberation Army rapidly modernises to meet President Xi Jinping's order that it have the capability to take Taiwan by force by 2027.

Seal Team 6 is a “tier one” force — the most elite in the US military — alongside the Army’s storied Delta Force. It reports to Joint Special Operations Command, which is part of Special Operations Command.

The unit rescued Richard Phillips, the captain of the Maersk Alabama container ship that was taken hostage by Somali pirates in 2009, in another mission that has helped cement its place in military history.

The Pentagon has in recent years sent more regular special forces to Taiwan for missions that include providing training for the Taiwanese military.

The Seal Team 6 activities are far more sensitive because its covert missions are highly classified. The people familiar with the team’s planning did not provide details about the missions.

Special Operations Command, which rarely discusses Seal Team 6, referred questions about its Taiwan planning to the Pentagon, which did not comment on specific details. A spokesperson said the defence department and its forces “prepare and train for a wide range of contingencies”.

As the threat from terror groups has receded, special operations forces have joined the rest of the US military and the intelligence community in intensifying their focus on China.

CIA director Bill Burns [told the Financial Times](#) last week that 20 per cent of his budget was devoted to China, a 200 per cent rise over three years.

“That Seal Team 6 is planning for possible Taiwan-related missions should come as no surprise,” said Sean Naylor, author of *Relentless Strike*, a book on Joint Special Operations Command, who runs an online national security publication, The High Side.

“With the Pentagon’s reorientation over the past few years to focus on great power competition, it was inevitable that even the nation’s most elite counterterrorism units would seek out roles in that arena, for that path leads to relevance, missions and money,” Naylor added.

Taiwan is the most sensitive issue in US-China relations, and tensions over the island have been a critical part of backchannel discussions between US national security adviser Jake Sullivan and Wang Yi, China’s top foreign policy official, over the past year, according to US and Chinese officials who [described the talks to the FT](#).

China says it remains committed to peaceful “reunification” with Taiwan but has not ruled out the use of force. Xi last year told a European official that he believed Washington was trying to goad China into war.

Washington is obliged to help Taiwan provide for its own defence under the Taiwan Relations Act. The US has long had a policy of “strategic ambiguity” in which it does not say if it would come to Taiwan’s defence. But President Joe Biden has on several occasions said US forces would defend Taiwan in the face of an unprovoked attack from China.

Admiral Samuel Paparo, head of the US Indo-Pacific Command, recently warned that the US military would turn the Taiwan Strait, which separates Taiwan from China, into an “unmanned hellscape” if Beijing were about to attack. He said doing so would involve unmanned submarines, ships and drones to make it much harder for the PLA to launch an invasion.

The Pentagon said the US was committed to the “one China policy” under which it recognises Beijing as the sole government of China while acknowledging — without accepting — the Chinese position that Taiwan is part of China.

The Chinese embassy in Washington said Taiwan was “the very core of China’s core interests and the first red line that must not be crossed in the China-US relationship”.

Liu Pengyu, the embassy spokesperson, said the US should “stop enhancing military contact with the Taiwan region or arming it” and “stop creating factors that could heighten tensions in the Taiwan Strait”.

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