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Truth and Tradition

Is America Ready for a War With China?

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The ammunition is running low, casualties are immense, medicine and other critical supplies have not come for weeks, and a nuclear attack on the American homeland is imminent.

It is a dramatic scene, more closely resembling a Hollywood drama than any war that the United States has actually fought in the last half-century. It is nevertheless what many expect a war between the United States and communist China could look like this decade.

Both the United States and China are investing record-breaking sums in building up their military capabilities. Leadership on both sides increasingly appears to consider such a conflict as inevitable, despite rhetoric to the contrary.

The cause for that mutual enmity is the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) claim that democratic Taiwan belongs to China, and CCP leader Xi Jinping's desire to force that unification within a few years' time.

Xi has ordered the regime's military wing to prepare for war, and to be ready to launch an invasion of Taiwan by 2027.

Preparing for what would be history's most ambitious amphibious assault is not the same as actually launching it. But, should the worst occur, the Biden administration or its successor will have to decide either to join the fray, or to let Taiwan stand on its own and fight for its freedom.

Before U.S. leadership decides on that question, however, it must answer another, more foundational one: Can the United States win a war with China?

‘The Window of Maximum Danger’

Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-Wisc.) is more invested in the new cold war between the United States and China than most.

Tasked with leading Congress’ new House Select Committee on Strategic Competition with the CCP, he is one of the few movers and shakers in the legislative branch directly engaged in developing an action plan to defend the American people, its economy, and values from CCP aggression.

For him, Russia’s ongoing conquest of Ukraine, and the United States’ failure to deter it, contain all the lessons necessary to prepare for what comes next in Taiwan.

“If we don’t learn the right lessons from the failure of deterrence in Ukraine, authoritarian aggression and the CCP’s malign influence will spread to the Indo-Pacific, and our New Cold War with the Chinese Communist Party could quickly become hot,” Gallagher told The Epoch Times.

“To prevent this, we have to act with a sense of urgency and do everything we can to deter a CCP invasion of Taiwan.”

That plan is much the same as it has been since 1979, when the United States passed the Taiwan Relations Act and agreed to provide the island with the arms necessary to maintain its self-defense.

The strategic landscape 44 years ago was something altogether different, however, and the number of weapons and systems that Taiwan now requires to hold the CCP at threat are immense.

The way Gallagher sees it, neither Taiwan nor the United States is prepared for the possibility of war with China.

Speaking back in November of 2021, Gallagher warned that, “if we went to war in the Taiwan Strait tomorrow, we’d probably lose.”

Gallagher is careful now to avoid similar doomspeak but, when asked if he still agreed with that assessment, his optimism for the United States' performance in a war with China is palpably limited.

“If the Chinese Communist Party invaded Taiwan today, we would not be well positioned to defend our friend, our interests, or American values in the Indo-Pacific,” Gallagher says.

The United States must choose, he believes, to arm Taiwan to the teeth now or come to Taiwan's aid at a much greater cost later.

Either way, the choices the United States makes now, he says, will largely determine the conditions of victory and defeat at a later date. To that end, Congress must unite to arm Taiwan and systematically counter the CCP's malign influence at every opportunity.

“We are in the window of maximum danger,” Gallagher says, “and if we are going to ensure that it's the U.S.—not the CCP—writing the rules of the 21st century, we need to unite in overwhelming bipartisan fashion to combat CCP aggression.”

Preventing Nuclear ‘Armageddon’

While the phrase “maximum danger” is superlative, it may still fall short of impressing the seriousness of the CCP's growing nuclear arsenal and the role that it will play in any conflict.

The CCP's military wing, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), has been working tirelessly to expand and enhance the regime's nuclear arsenal and to hold the U.S. homeland at threat.

The regime is expected to field 1,000 nuclear weapons by 2030, many of them capable of carrying multiple warheads. And it is working to field hypersonic bombardment systems apparently designed to be used as a first-strike weapon.

Such capabilities would put the United States at grave risk in a war and would present a decision-making dynamic among both militaries unseen since the Cold War.

Retired U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Robert Spalding knows something about PLA decision-making.

His career has taken him to China on more than one occasion, including a stint as a defense attache in Beijing, where he negotiated with PLA officers on critical events and established contours for managing strategic competition.

When asked if the United States could win a war against China over the future of Taiwan, Spalding answers clearly and simply.

“No,” Spalding says. “The Chinese have too many weapons and they are too close to home.”

“The U.S. could not muster enough combat power to stop China.”

The United States’ ability to project power across 3,000 miles of the Pacific Ocean is sorely lacking, he says.

Sustaining a full combat force in the region all while being held at threat by the PLA’s missile and rocket forces, to say nothing of its navy, would risk nuclear escalation at every moment.

Simply put, the United States would be outmanned and outgunned by China in any Indo-Pacific conflict. Strategic nuclear weapons in such a scenario become the United States’ most clear advantage, and the world’s most clear threat.

Spalding, understandably, views the use of nuclear weapons as a no-win scenario. Still, he does consider the strengthening of the United States’ nuclear deterrent as an essential element to deter China from extending its aggression beyond Taiwan.

“The only weapons that would enable us to balance the conventional military might of China are nuclear weapons,” Spalding says. “These would give the U.S. a fighting chance, but would be devastating for the U.S., China, and the world.”

“Nevertheless, the surest way to war is to appear weak. This is why it is imperative that the U.S. project power. Today, the only way is with nuclear weapons. We don’t have time for anything else.”

To that end, Spalding says that the United States will need to immediately start transitioning critical supply chains, including pharmaceuticals and technological resources, out of China. Leaving the delivery of such items to China is a surefire way to lose any war.

“There is no time but, nevertheless, the U.S. needs to rebuild its industrial base now while we still have some level of control,” Spalding says.

He underscores that, because the United States would be stuck trying to create new supply chains for critical resources even as current supply chains through China are destroyed, deaths at home and on the front lines could ensue.

Embedded in Spalding’s view is a certain duality present among many today. On the one hand, he believes a CCP invasion is inevitable. On the other, he believes U.S. aid to Taiwan in such a war should fall short of military intervention, which he believes would risk a nuclear holocaust.

“They [the CCP] will invade at a time of their choosing,” Spalding says. “We have to prepare for the inevitable help the Taiwanese people will need.”

“If America is attacked, it will fight. That said, I believe China will not attack the U.S. directly for fear of a wider war that consumes the CCP. This and America’s nuclear weapons will prevent Armageddon if we show strength.”

Defense Industrial Base ‘Not Adequately Prepared’ for War with China

Provided the United States did come to the defense of Taiwan, however, and provided it could adequately deter the PLA from launching nuclear missiles, victory would still be far from assured.

Beyond the logistical issue of supplying the front lines—that is the problem of actually getting ammo to rifles and munitions to guns across the Pacific—the United States simply does not have the stockpiles required to conduct anything other than a brief, perhaps weeks-long campaign in the Pacific.

Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth said as much during a March 30 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, during which she explained that the nation’s support for Ukraine is rapidly depleting its own munitions stockpiles, and that it would be years before replacement was possible.

“One of the most important things we have learned from Ukraine is the need for a more robust defense industrial base,” Wormuth said.

“We are buying at the absolute edge of defense industrial capacity right now.”

To that end, Wormuth said that the Army is spending \$1.5 billion on surging production of new munitions and depots to create an “organic supply base.”

Due to the complexity of the supply chains involved and the specialized nature of the equipment, however, standing up such production and procurement efforts will take years. Well beyond the 2025-2027 start date that many military officials believe a Taiwan invasion scenario could come to fruition.

“Some of the machining tools that are needed to open up new production lines are just very large, complex machines themselves that take time to fabricate and time to install,” Wormuth said.

To be sure, not all of the munitions that the United States is currently hemorrhaging in Ukraine would necessarily be useful in a fight for Taiwan.

The 155 mm rounds used by many artillery systems in Ukraine, for example, would lose their preeminence to long-range anti-ship missiles, or LRASMs.

But here again, the United States is simply not prepared for war.

Wargames demonstrate that the United States could deplete its entire arsenal of LRASMs within one single week of fighting with China, according to a January report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank.

“In a major regional conflict—such as a war with China in the Taiwan Strait—the U.S. use of munitions would likely exceed the current stockpiles of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), leading to a problem of ‘empty bins.’”

“The problem is the U.S. has such low stockpiles for those long-range anti-ship missiles that in our wargames, in multiple iterations of the wargame, we run out [of LRASMs] in less than a week virtually every time,” report author Seth Jones said in an associated video.

“We cannot fight in that case in protracted war because we don’t have sufficient supply of munitions.”

On this issue, military procurement programs are thus far proving of little worth. Though Army leaders like Wormuth may point to renewed investments in artillery, and speak of growing the nation’s stockpiles, one critical and inconvenient fact remains.

Nearly the entirety of the U.S. military's precision munitions is built by the private sector.

Assistant Secretary of the Army Douglas Bush spoke on the issue during a March 3 talk at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank.

“The broader joint view is, of course, that a fight with China will be very much a precision munitions fight,” Bush said.

To overcome that gap in manufacturing ability, he added, the U.S. Army is funneling money to private corporations to effectively subsidize precision munitions production. Supply chains are no less complicated for those entities, however, and are likewise expected to take years to become functional.

A World at War

The risks of a war for Taiwan morphing into a catastrophic nuclear conflict or else depleting the United States' arsenal of vital munitions and leaving it enfeebled in the western Pacific appear to be high.

But what if they could be overcome?

Sam Kessler is a national security and geopolitical risk analyst for North Star Support Group, an international risk advisory firm. He believes victory is possible in such a scenario, but only narrowly.

Kessler says that the war would need to be fought and won quickly to prevent nuclear escalation, retain the nation's stockpiles, and ensure the global economy does not spiral into nothingness as the world's two largest economies duke it out.

To do that, he says, the United States needs the support of its allies to stem the outward flow of manpower and materiel.

“Although the U.S. has significant, powerful capabilities at its disposal, a potential war over the defense of Taiwan would need to be fought and won within a short time frame,” Kessler says.

“If there is a war between the U.S. and China, the U.S. needs to have its longstanding allies involved and committed under a unified banner.”

To that end, Kessler says that the need for allies will be most prevalent in securing global supply chains, bolstering the U.S. economy, and providing critical, non-military defense and security support in domains like space and cyber.

“The risk is a long, drawn-out conflict that depletes both manpower and resources over a period that won’t be so easily replaced in a world where supply chains, logistics, and manufacturing outlets are being re-evaluated and restructured to meet changing realities,” Kessler says.

“After all, a potential war will not just be about direct fighting on the shores of Taiwan but also in other domains of warfare that greatly impact U.S. standing and power projection at home and abroad, which can also potentially impact its global partners and allies.”

Because of the technological and economic interconnectivity of the world, he says, most nations would become involved in such a war one way or another, regardless of whether they sought to remain neutral.

Kessler, therefore, suggests the creation of a multilateral coalition of the willing, not unlike the one deployed in the Gulf War.

On this point, there is one critical problem. Because the United States would be entering a war of its own volition, it would not be entitled to the benefits of NATO’s collective defense clause.

Thus, while regional allies such as Japan and Australia could well join the fight, the United States’ European partners would likely be absent in the actual fighting.

Indeed, French President Emmanuel Macron suggested as much in early April, saying that Europe must resist becoming “America’s followers” on the issue of Taiwan.

To shore up the United States’ position then, Kessler says that the nation needs to start turning up its diplomacy efforts now, in order to ensure it receives security aid and other benefits from its partners in the war.

“Sooner or later, they would likely end up being in situations where their hands are forced to declare a position on the matter,” Kessler says. “Whether war occurs or not, the U.S. needs full assurance from its longstanding partners and allies that they have their support and vice versa.”

“To make this happen requires aggressive and proactive diplomacy as well as presenting a strong and rational case for creating a coalition of the willing.”

Here again, though, the United States is not the only one with allies.

Though the CCP regime does not formally engage in NATO-style alliances, it does have a string of partners across the globe who would be either willing to engage in direct support of its war effort or otherwise pursue their own destabilizing interests while the United States was distracted.

“Alliances and partnerships are crucial to both China and the U.S but each implements them differently,” Kessler says.

“The CCP recognizes partners in the form of client states that could play a role in helping destabilize American leadership in the international system, while spearheading a multipolar system that they can lead and project influence themselves.”

The result of the CCP’s push for multipolarity is that its own partners could launch destabilizing conflicts of their own.

One report by the Center for a New American Security think tank, for example, postulates that North Korea could use a CCP invasion of Taiwan to launch its own attack on South Korea.

The problem is not limited to East Asia either.

Iran could initiate further hostilities against U.S. forces in Syria or even invade neighboring Iraq. Russia, meanwhile, could extend its hostilities from Ukraine to Moldova, or otherwise provide direct military support to China. Brazil, Nicaragua, and South Africa could all capitalize on the event to increase their ties with China and Russia while avoiding engaging in hostilities themselves.

The result would be a world at war if not a world war outright.

“Each of these nations are skilled in the distraction game and a war effort in defense of Taiwan would present them with a unique opportunity to attempt at catching the U.S. off guard to gain a victory or prize out of it,” Kessler says.

“The likelihood of such regional conflicts erupting in these areas is very high.”

He believes the extent to which each nation takes advantage of a U.S.-China war will be dependent not only on their relationship with China, but also their own capabilities, goals, and political-economic realities.

While war might suit Russia, for example, smaller economic partners like South Africa and Brazil would be more likely to engage in increased trade or sanctions busting.

The resulting effect is political chaos, and a world in which instability and disruption are the norm.

US Should 'Hedge' its Bets

But what if we're getting it all wrong: if Taiwan is not the next global catastrophe waiting to happen, and if the United States can fight and win but doesn't even need to.

Such is the perspective of former acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller.

For Miller, the military decision-making apparatus is prone to see only what it wants to see. Everything looks like a nail to a hammer, the old saying goes.

"I know the one thing we will get wrong is we will mispredict the next major conflict," Miller said during an April 4 talk with the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank.

"That's the only thing I know."

On that note, Miller said that he worries the United States is overestimating the capabilities and expertise of the CCP regime the same way it did of Russia prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Far from being a peer military competitor, Miller suggested that the CCP could be deploying a strategy similar to the one used by the United States to defeat the Soviet Union without overt conflict during the Cold War.

By fooling the United States into believing that war is constantly imminent the CCP could actually be goading the United States into destroying its own economy through excessive investments in major military platforms, Miller said.

"I think they're goading us and we're just taking it [at face value]," Miller said.

As such, Miller said that the threat to Taiwan's continued de facto independence was a reality, but that the United States could be playing into the CCP's plans by heavily investing in ultra-expensive, and easily targetable systems such as fighter jets and aircraft carriers.

Miller pointed instead to the four elements of national power: diplomacy, information, military, and economics.

To obtain victory against China, and to preserve greater liberty across the world, he said, the best path forward for the United States is to better leverage the non-military elements of national power.

"I believe with the Chinese threat, the way to approach that is a very subtle and indirect approach ... irregular warfare," Miller said.

"Let's go ahead and use a little more ... diplomacy, information, and economics, and let's go ahead and back off on the military for a little while, because we have time. If we're wrong, we can spin things up."

When asked by the Epoch Times what advice he had for directing the nation's military development given that a future war with China was as of yet unwritten, Miller said that the best course of action was to hedge the nation's bets.

"If you're a business person and you're in an unpredictable business climate, what do you do? You hedge."

"We can't go all in on any one thing. We need to have a wide range of capabilities."

To simultaneously avoid the disaster of war in Asia *and* defeat the regime, he said, the best weapon in the U.S. arsenal was the truth about the CCP.

By shining an unflinching light on the atrocities committed by the regime every day, and by ensuring that those atrocities were seen and understood by the Chinese people, the regime will crumble to internal pressures.

"My belief is that authoritarian, totalitarian governments fear one thing: Popular discontent and popular uprising... The thing that they fear most is not fleets of aircraft carriers, tanks, or expeditionary logistics. They fear information. And that's one of the key components of irregular warfare."

"Just tell the truth. It will work through it."