China moves to dominate Pacific with U.S. mired in Ukraine

By Cleo Paskal

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Alexandria, Virginia: Beijing must think that many of the pieces are now in place for China to quickly, decisively and overtly expand its sphere of influence to the maritime boundary of Hawaii.

We know it’s what China wants—and has wanted for a long time. In 2008, then United States PACOM Commander Admiral Timothy J. Keating told the Senate Armed Services Committee that a senior Chinese officer suggested to him that, “why don’t we reach an agreement, you and I? You take Hawaii east. We’ll take Hawaii west. We’ll share information, and we’ll save you all the trouble of deploying your naval forces west of Hawaii.”
To some that may have seemed far-fetched, but those looking at China with clear eyes took it very seriously. Capt. James Fanell, former Director of Intelligence for the U.S. Pacific Fleet, started warning in around 2012 that, given Chinese strategic goals and the focus and rate of China’s military modernization and build-up, the decade starting in 2020 would be the “Decade of Concern”.

Now, just two years into that decade, it looks like China has put in place many of the pieces it needs to achieve that goal with focus, funding and, to a large degree, success. It is on the cusp of having the hard power, the soft power, and the political will to make its move.

THE PLA NAVY (PLAN)

China is developing a world-class military. The tip of that spear is the PLA Navy (PLAN). Beijing wants to be capable of challenging, and eventually displacing, America as the world’s preeminent naval power.

Between 2016 and 2020, the Chinese Navy added the equivalent of Japan’s entire current surface fleet and it is on track to have nearly twice as many surface ships as the U.S. Navy before the end of the decade.

And it is deploying around the region in ways we haven’t seen before. When Tonga was hit with a volcano and tsunami, there was a rush of international support. Australia sent its largest warship, the HMAS Adelaide. After arriving in Tonga it suffered a major electrical fault, incapacitating it. Soon after, a fully operational PLAN amphibious assault ship sailed into Tonga as part of one of China’s first major regional Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR) efforts.

Under China’s policy of civil-military fusion, we’ve seen Chinese fishing fleets used for strategic goals. Now its military is presenting itself as a force for good, allowing it to come into new ports, learn more about local conditions and make new friends along the way.

GEOGRAPHY

The problem for China is that to use its Navy unfettered, it needs assured access out of its ports and into the Pacific and beyond. But looking out from the east coast of China there is a series of island chains that can be used to block that access.

The first island chain, roughly stretching down Japan, through Taiwan and on to the Philippines is known as the “first island chain”. The second and third chains include a region known as Micronesia that includes the U.S. territories of Guam and the Northern Marianas, and the three U.S. Freely Associated States (independent countries that have uniquely close relationships with the U.S.): Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI).
US planners are aware of this. Regarding the possibility of a Chinese attack on Taiwan, on 9 March, INDOPACOM Commander Admiral Aquilino said at a House Armed Services Committee hearing that “we have to look at this and say ‘Hey, this could happen’.” He also stated: “Guam’s strategic importance is difficult to overstate.”

TAIWAN

So, how far along is China in having the ability to achieve its goals? In terms of Taiwan, it’s likely some of the basic lessons Beijing is taking from the Russian invasion of Ukraine include: the longer the aggressor spends bogged down, the longer defenders and their supporter have to assemble a response; support for the defenders increases with awareness of the devastation of the attack; and there may not be the political will in Washington to intervene directly (what happened in Afghanistan also contributes to this assessment).

If that is accurate, and Beijing decides that it wants to go with a kinetic attack on Taiwan rather than trying to achieve its goals through the attrition of political warfare, Beijing is likely to try to cut off communications with Taiwan and go in very fast and very hard, achieving a coup de main.

Beijing seems to have a deep set of capabilities in place. For example, it was an odd coincidence that, during the recent visit to Taiwan of former Secretary of State Michael Pompeo—not a favourite of the Chinese Communist Party—a sudden power outage disrupted his meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen.

It is of course likely that, as with Ukraine, China may find the Taiwanese more willing to fight for their country than anticipated. And that seeing what is happening in Ukraine, Taiwan will ramp up its defenses. But, if Beijing does achieve its goal, the cascade effect could fundamentally change the global balance of power.

NORTH-SOUTH AXIS

Should Taiwan fall to China, some experts anticipate that a whole range of countries along the Asian coast will rapidly fall into the Chinese orbit—with some possible exceptions such as Japan. The thinking will be “if the U.S. won’t or can’t defend Taiwan, it won’t or can’t defend us so we better cut a deal with Beijing.”

EAST-WEST AXIS

What also needs to be considered is that, if Taiwan falls, it wouldn’t take much for Beijing to have a clear run though the Micronesian region, to the maritime boundary of Hawaii.

The U.S. territories (i.e. Guam) may be bypassed so as not to trigger a direct American response, but China is much closer that it might seem to achieving deep influence in the five countries of Micronesia. And a big part of the reason for that is mismanagement of the relationships by the U.S. government.
The three Freely Associated States (FAS), Palau, FSM and RMI are traditionally very close to the U.S., with their citizens even serving in the U.S. military at rates that exceed most U.S. states.

However Chinese political warfare has been finding China influential friends in these countries in part because of impatience bordering on anger with the U.S. dragging its feet on contentious and unresolved issues, such as the U.S. nuclear tests in RMI, the State Department pressure on them about regional organizations, and the lack of renewal of the financial components of their arrangements with the U.S.

While the U.S. dithers about not wanting to pay for postal service to the FAS, China has approached at least two of them saying “how much do you want? Just tell us, you’ll have it in your bank accounts—or in cash—immediately.”

The result is, for example, in Palau, at the last Presidential election, two candidates were “soft on China”, one had agreed to a deal with the U.S. that the population found unfair, and the fourth ran on a platform that included getting a better deal with the U.S.

The fourth won. He is fundamentally pro-American, and even asked the U.S. to set up a military base in Palau—putting himself directly in Beijing’s firing line. But so far the U.S. hasn’t delivered a better deal (by U.S. government standards, the amounts involved are minuscule). And that’s in spite of close to half-a-dozen bipartisan letters going from Congress to the Administration asking for the issue to be resolved. That inaction puts a pro-U.S. President in Palau not only at personal risk but political risk.

If he’s replaced, it is unlikely to be with someone more friendly to the U.S. And those who think the pieces of paper that tie the Freely Associated States to the U.S. will protect American interests haven’t been paying to Chinese lawfare tactics. If a new leader in Palau says “we are done with offering the U.S. strategic denial over our territory”, what is the U.S. going to do? Send in the Marines to take the country (again)?

IN SIGHT OF PEARL HARBOR

Fundamentally, most of the five Micronesian countries are an election, or vote of no confidence, away from slipping into China’s orbit. Some are very close already. Kiribatiswitched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019 and is in talks with China about redeveloping an old American World War II runway on a strategically located island, about 1,800 km south-west of Hawaii, for use by “tourists”.

If Taiwan falls, and especially if the U.S. still hasn’t resolved its issues with the FAS, China might island hop its way to the doorstep of Pearl Harbor before anyone in Washington has a chance to react.
And what happens then? It’s likely Beijing is betting that what will happen is: nothing. Except maybe more House Committee hearings where a future INDOPACOM Commander can try to explain what went wrong.

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