

War Games: China Invades Taiwan

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, finance, history, politics and current events. Today's session will be on War Games: China Invades Taiwan.

Richard Fontaine and his team at the Center for a New American Security or CNAS developed war games with retired defense officials and members of congress. A few days ago, there were war games to see what happens if China were to invade Taiwan.

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Let's begin with Richard Fontaine and his opening presentation.

Richard Fontaine:

Why engage in war games in the first place? Wars are complex, dangerous, costly events. The games require us to confront the difficult choices facing policy makers and vividly see the consequences.

We have a very talented team that designs and implements these kinds of war games. The NBC segment is just the tip of the iceberg. The team spent weeks researching and designing the scenario, and it did produce real insights.

The interest in Taiwan has been rising for obvious reasons. Given that China continues to up the ante, the Speaker of the House's visit to Taiwan provoked a response. Three times over the preceding months, President Biden has publicly said that the United States will defend Taiwan. And everyone's trying to learn the lessons of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The Red Team's goal was a unified Taiwan with the mainland and the Blue Team tried to prevent the Chinese from doing that. That set up a crisis situation. Debate over independence in the Taiwanese legislature erupts into a political crisis. Beijing demands immediate unification talks; Taipei refuses to join, China mobilizes its armed forces. Undertakes a significant buildup in the East and ultimately takes a cross-strait operation against Taiwan to decapitate the government. And in-so doing launched preemptive strikes against the United States to keep the

United States out of the war. That didn't work. America did enter the war on Taiwan's side, bombs China and things escalated even further from there.

Most striking in the game was how destructive this US-China clash became, how quickly it escalated, and how the game concluded with no end in sight to the conflict. Japan and Australia entered the war, China and the United States attacked each other directly. And Beijing detonated a nuclear weapon above the ocean, which would've marked the first use of nuclear weapons in combat since World War II. When the game was finished, both sides believed that they hadn't lost the battle for Taiwan and intended to keep the war going at very significant cost. All this suggests a clash over Taiwan might well be a prolonged war rather than a short conflict, that it could very easily extend to regions beyond the Western Pacific, that both sides might be willing to escalate significantly, and that the consequences of such a war are particularly grave.

The game illustrated some ways in which the United States and its allies can strengthen their deterrence, hopefully increasing the chances that they won't have to fight such a destructive war in the first place.

Larry Bernstein:

I watched the war games on NBC's *Meet the Press*. What shocked me was China's decision in the opening gambit to do a surprise attack against American forces. The Chinese wanted to cutoff American military resupply during the opening battle so that the Chinese could win in a walk off. The Red Team's approach was to repeat Pearl Harbor. Awaken a sleeping giant again in the same way. The second decision that was totally unexpected was your Red Team's decision to make a simultaneous surprise attack on American forces in Japan. Why would China want to begin its war with two additional belligerents which have global GDP rankings of 1 and 3 respectively at the same time?

Using the Red Team's logic, it would like Russia having a surprise attack on the US and the EU in its war in Ukraine. This seems totally insane to me.

Richard Fontaine:

We saw the Taiwan scenarios quite different than the Ukraine scenario for one big reason: the President of the United States said the United States would intervene militarily. And that same president has said three times now, publicly, that the United States would defend Taiwan if it was attacked by China. So, our calculation was that the United States was gonna join the war one way or the other. And we also believe that Japan was gonna join the war.

The question was does the United States join the war with all of its forces intact or with some of its forces destroyed. And we chose to launch a preemptive attack on US forces. If you're gonna do that, you are attacking other sovereign territory, particularly Japan, because that's where some of those US forces are. Whether the Chinese would do that, that's hard to say, but it's certainly a scenario that I think we need to be ready for.

Larry Bernstein:

There's been a lot of discussion about the Quad, which is the undeclared military alliance that includes the United States, Australia, Japan, and India. Because of the attack on Japan, the Japanese are clearly all-in. In the war game, did Australia and India join the fight?

Richard Fontaine:

The Australians did join the war in the naval and air campaign against China. The Japanese did, the Indians did not. I don't think that the American side ever thought that they would and certainly the Chinese side didn't either.

Larry Bernstein:

And why is that? The whole idea of the Quad is to incorporate India, the largest democracy in the world, billion plus people. India can press Chinese weakness in the Indian Ocean. No oil for you; it's a big problem. Why did India want to stay out of the fight?

Why does India expect the other Quad members to defend India if they are unwilling to contain Chinese aggression in the South China Sea?

Richard Fontaine:

The Quad is not a military alliance. It's not a mutual defense pack, so it doesn't require the defense of each other the way that the alliances with Japan and Australia do. Although Taiwan is not an ally of theirs, the Indians are more worried about their land border with China, which as recently as last year saw violent skirmishes.

Larry Bernstein:

India is the world's largest democracy, a nuclear power, and has the 5th largest GDP. The country is in a strategic position in the Indian Ocean to disrupt Chinese shipping in a huge way. What does it mean that India is a member of the Quad if a war breaks out with the other three members and India chooses to sit it out? Maybe we need to change the name to triad.

Richard Fontaine:

India today has its own interests which include not seeing a Chinese invasion across their border. If China was to move on Taiwan and the United States and Australia and Japan were to respond, there's no telling exactly what the Indians would do, but I think that they would take non-military steps to show their deep disapproval. The Indians would have to calculate what are the risks with their land border. I suspect that when they worked all of that out, they would stay out of the war.

Larry Bernstein:

South Korea is nearly as close to Taiwan as Japan. American military forces are located in Seoul but the Red Team left them unmolested. Why did the Chinese not attack American forces in Seoul and will South Korea join the fight?

Richard Fontaine:

The American troops in South Korea are there to deter an attack by North Korea against the South. Both the South Korean troops and the American troops are focused primarily with peninsula security, as opposed to the defense of Taiwan. That makes it quite different than the American forces in other parts of Asia, including Japan. If there were forces that were going to come to the defense of Taiwan, they would certainly come from Japan. So the calculation on the Chinese team was if we know where the forces are very likely to come from, let's hit those forces before they get here in order to make sure that there is a degraded force that's coming our way. We didn't think that either American or Korean forces were gonna leave the peninsula to come fight for Taiwan.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's go back to December 7th, 1941. American military planners were taken completely by surprise at Pearl Harbor. In a previous podcast on World War 2 battles in the Pacific, Yale historian Paul Kennedy highlighted that US Admiral Husband Kimmel did not drop torpedo nets to protect our battleships because he thought a Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor was inconceivable. Was Team Blue taken by complete surprise in your wargame?

Richard Fontaine:

Yes. In the game the Americans didn't believe that the Chinese would launch a major preemptive strike against US forces. They did take steps which turned out to be prescient, distributing forces around Japan and making it harder to target those forces. The other thing that surprised the American side was the Chinese willingness to escalate to the nuclear level. The Americans were trying to calibrate their responses to limit escalation, to not make the Chinese think that their government itself was at risk of destruction. In each step, the Chinese blew through those <laugh> those escalator barriers and took it up another notch, which in turn brought the Americans up another notch on their escalatory ladder.

Larry Bernstein:

Richard you were one of the leaders on the Red Team, why did you escalate every chance you got?

Richard Fontaine:

Our instructions were to reunify with Taiwan. We made the decision that escalation was better because the status quo had not achieved its objective of seizing Taiwan. And de-escalation, would've been a terrible failure on this personal legacy project for the leader of China. Hence escalation.

Larry Bernstein:

In Act One, Scene One of the war game, the Red Team's attempted to murder the senior Taiwanese leadership. This is not a new idea for Communist regimes in Asia. In 1983, the North Koreans sent a team of assassins to kill the entire South Korean government leadership who were visiting a mausoleum in Rangoon Burma. The North Koreans successfully killed 21 people but they the South Korean President survived.

This assassination plan is followed by a full-scale cross-strait invasion of Taiwan. This is difficult, but nearly impossible if the island is properly defended. What happened?

Richard Fontaine:

Every aspect of the cross straits operation to seize Taipei, to establish authority on Taiwan from the Chinese perspective, turned out much harder than we had anticipated.

Hopefully that is a wakeup call for the Chinese, but also a wakeup call for the Taiwanese. If you have the Chinese trying to take your island there is a very good case for asymmetric capabilities—sea mines. What you buy and how you train your forces to resist is very important.

Larry Bernstein:

Invasions by sea are precarious. Normandy was a complex and enormous invasion and the Germans knew we were coming. The allied invasion used 7000 ships, 2400 aircraft, and 900 gliders. This was an unprecedented undertaking. How could China do something like this without giving up the element of surprise? Also at Normandy, the Germans employed pillboxes on hills above the beaches and were formidable defensive lines. Can Taiwan prepare for the invasion to make it challenging for the invading Chinese forces?

Richard Fontaine:

The goal of the Red Team was to seize Taiwan quickly, declare a *fait accompli* before the Americans arrived, and to tell the Americans, “look, the Chinese control this island and the price of your intervention is going to be sky high.” It didn't work because of the difficulties in getting troops across the strait. The Chinese side wanted to achieve air dominance so they could protect the ships bringing troops across the strait. The Americans were still able to target Chinese vessels.

The theory was if you can seize Taipei, that would be the center of political gravity for the island. That's true, but Taipei is not a small neighborhood. As we saw in Ukraine, if the government is still going, the leader can rally the people to resist. That was one of the reasons why the war went to an indefinite, costly, drawn out conflict.

Putting sea mines in the strait close to Taiwan is obvious. We see the Ukrainians doing this on the Black Sea to try to prevent the Russian warships from landing. There's some lessons in the Ukrainian experience here, but the Chinese are learning lessons of what not to do as well.

Larry Bernstein:

If I were on the Red Team, I would have opposed a surprise attack on US forces. If you want to keep America out of the fight, rule one, don't bomb Pearl Harbor. I would recommend a blockade and force the US to escalate. What were you thinking?

Richard Fontaine:

The game was constructed to draw the United States and China into a conflict. The instruction was to take Taiwan, but that doesn't mean that's the entirety of scenarios. The Chinese might blockade Taiwan. In the aftermath of Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, they basically practiced a blockade of the island.

Kinmen Island three miles off of the Chinese mainland, much closer to the mainland than it is to the island of Taiwan. If the Chinese took Kinmen and then dared the United States, is it willing to go to war against China for Kinmen? Erode the credibility of the American security commitment. I think there's a number of plausible scenarios beyond an all-out invasion of Taiwan.

Larry Bernstein:

During the Eisenhower administration, the Chinese bombed the Kinmen Islands. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles threatened China with nuclear weapons. The Americans have plenty of ways to challenge an invasion of these seemingly irrelevant but symbolically important Kinmen Islands. I would suggest alternatives such as the US recognize Taiwan as independent country, entering into a NATO-like military alliance with Taiwan that included an Article 5, establishing a strategic US military base on Taiwan, or simply give Taiwan a few nuclear weapons and say you guys figure this out. Does that explain the Red Team's decision to go big and discourage US political escalation?

Richard Fontaine:

The Red Team started by attempting to seize the island of Taiwan and preemptively striking American forces. There was no question, no question that the United States is gonna enter the war. You don't attack American forces and then assume they're gonna sit it out. Americans were coming in one way or the other. It's better for them to come in with less force than more. But any actual debate about whether the United States should enter the war, they took that off the table.

If the Chinese were to take Kinmen you could imagine them doing it in a relatively non-military way without a lot of casualties. Now the upside is you might keep the United States out of the war. But all you've got is Kinmen. So, if your objective is to retake Taiwan, you got a long way to go.

Larry Bernstein:

In 1998, I lived in Tokyo with my wife.

Richard Fontaine:

In 1998, I lived in Saitama Prefecture.

Larry Bernstein:

I didn't realize we were neighbors in Japan. A quarter of a century ago, US-Japanese relations were seemingly strong. But there were concerns that the US alliance might pull Japan into a war.

In the past 25 years, the biggest geopolitical change has been the rise of China. The Japanese rightly fear Chinese military aggression. There have been some fights over some uninhabited Japanese islands. And so there may come a time where Japan will either have to rearm or become a vassal of China, if the US is unwilling or unable to defend Japan. And the Japanese understand that there is an expectation that they will be an equal partner in containing China in their region. And that if there is a war over Taiwan they will fight. And fight hard not just with sanctions, base use, and supplies. Your war game highlights China's recognition that Japan will fight and work directly with the US, so does this explain China's surprise attack of US forces on Japan?

Richard Fontaine:

It's very unlikely that Japan would stay out of a war between the United States and China over Taiwan, precisely because the Chinese would attack American forces in Japan. The question, then is, is Japan gonna be active in its own self-defense or not. The appetite to engage in self-defense is much higher than it used to be.

When you and I lived in Japan, America's wars from 1991 through 2003 were all in Europe and the Middle East. It wasn't a direct threat to Japan. Now they sense of potential threat to Japan. The calculation that the Japanese would make about the defense of Taiwan is quite different than it used to be. Nevertheless, some of this would just depend on who the prime minister is. It would depend on the perception of who started it. A lot would turn on this question of whether Japan itself was attacked. But I think the chances that Japan would enter the war in some way, shape or form are quite high.

Larry Bernstein:

There's a tremendous amount of animosity between those China and Japan because of their history. It's at a low simmer. In Japanese textbooks there's a defense of their occupation of China and Korea. A selective amnesia about the Rape of Nanking.

Japanese multinational corporations are HUGE in China. The Japanese have to be concerned about undermining its enormous investment in Chinese companies. Talk about supply chain disruptions, I mean this would be end of days.

Richard Fontaine:

The Japanese face the same kind of dilemma that every country in Asia faces. What country is America's biggest trade partner? It's China, the same country that the political leadership is saying is a potential threat. This is wildly different than during the Cold War where the United States and the Soviet Union didn't have much economic interdependence. Do you want to

trade with a country that you think is a potential threat? The answer appears to be yes, but not across the board.

Larry Bernstein:

During your war games, you included senior defense officials, as well as two congressmen. One of them was Mike Gallagher, Republican House Representative from Wisconsin. One of the things that shocked Gallagher was that America could not achieve air superiority over Taiwan despite their best efforts. It helps to fight from a home base with all the benefits of resupply. Hawaii's far away, its 5300 miles from Taiwan and its military bases have already been blown up. San Diego is 7000 miles away, good luck on resupply. During the war games, how important was air superiority and what were the teams willing to do to achieve it?

Richard Fontaine:

From the Red Team perspective, we wanted air superiority to ferry troops across the strait to land on Taiwan. We wanted air superiority over Taiwan, so that Taiwanese aircraft couldn't attack the Chinese troops that were landing in Taiwan. Later in the game, we wanted air superiority to protect the Chinese mainland because the Americans were attacking ports and other areas on the Chinese mainland. This preemptive strike, not only on American forces in various places, but also on the Taiwanese air fields and bunkers.

Larry Bernstein:

Chinese hypersonic missiles could destroy American carriers thousands of miles from the war zone. In the war games, where did the Blue Team position the American carrier fleet and could American fighters cause damage to the Red Team?

Richard Fontaine:

Those carriers feeling vulnerable would retreat from the Western Pacific. It would make it very difficult if not impossible for aircraft from those carriers to engage in the fight. The Americans didn't have air superiority, but the Chinese didn't have air dominance either. It gets to your point of distance. It also gets to the point about numbers. The one thing that struck me playing on the Red Team was how deep the stocks were. If you wanted fighter jets, they had fighter jets. You wanted subs, we got those too. You want troops? We got a lot of troops. They had everything.

Americans have not been attacked from the air since the Korean War. We had air dominance almost immediately in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is a very different scenario.

Larry Bernstein:

In John Lewis Gaddis' classic book *Strategies of Containment*, John highlighted two different strategies available to US military planners. One was a symmetric response, which means that when your opponent escalates to fight in Taiwan, you fight back in Taiwan. With the asymmetric response, when your opponent invades Taiwan, you blow up their space satellites. You want to fight in Taiwan. Guess what? We're taking the port in Djibouti and in Sri Lanka. We're going to blow up your rail network and oil pipelines between Russia and China. Did Team

Blue consider changing the nature of the fight? It's not about Taiwan, we are going to pick your weakest links and trust me you're not going to like it.

Richard Fontaine:

They didn't engage in what is called horizontal escalation. Certainly, that is an available strategy, but it is at odds with a strategy to avoid escalation, which Blue Team was trying to do. They wanted to keep this confined. They wanted the Chinese not to escalate to the nuclear level. If you're Chinese, with bases in Djibouti, well, now you've attacked an African country. Escalation is a complicated calculation.

Larry Bernstein:

In the Korean War, the Chinese provided troops and support for the North Koreans. General MacArthur was furious and wanted to expand the war into China itself, with the potential use of nuclear weapons and said, the only way for us to win was to attack the Chinese mainland. To quote your favorite line from the film *The Princess Bride*, "You fell victim to one of the classic blunders! The most famous of which is 'Never get involved in a land war in Asia.'"

Richard Fontaine:

Other than on the Korean peninsula, there are no American troops on the Asian mainland. A land invasion, that's not on the table.

Larry Bernstein:

What constraints did the Blue Team face on attacking mainland China? Did they consider destroying the highways and rail lines connecting Chinese cities, destroying chemical and oil facilities, or damaging the electric grid? Can you imagine if the Chinese ports were bombed and the super container ships were listing at a 45-degree angle?

Richard Fontaine:

The strikes on the mainland were exclusively air missile strikes that the Blue Team conducted. They hit ports on the Chinese coast. And then some demonstration strikes in Northern China, quite a far away from the coast, as a demonstration of what kind of capabilities they could bring to bear. The issue for the Blue Team is you could attack Chinese cities, but what do you achieve? And probably not from an ethical perspective that attacking some other civilian sort of targets or anything would have anything close to the desired effect.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's imagine that the Chinese attacks against Taiwan hits civilian neighborhoods, schools bombed. Taiwan Semiconductor's factory blown to smithereens. There are a lot of similar chips factories in mainland China. Bomb our highways to undermine Taiwan's defense. You wanna play that game? You drew first blood. After Pearl Harbor, ethics? More like that led to fire-bombing Tokyo, Hiroshima. They destroy factories, we'll destroy your ports. It's gonna get crazy. How does this make any sense for China? Why do they care about the independence of 15 million Taiwanese who want to live in peace. Yea, I get it, it is a part of China, yada yada,

yada, but is it worth dying over it? Has the Red Team been following the Russian war in Ukraine?

Richard Fontaine:

If you believe that your national destiny and a leader's personal legacy is tied up in reunification. That this is somehow akin to the South seceding and Civil War. Then almost any price is worth it.

Part of the educational process of this game is to show how little enthusiasm anyone should have for US-China war. This would be unlike anything we have seen, therefore how do we avoid that?

If the Chinese believe the status quo is no longer acceptable, that they must take steps in order to overturn it, then they're not going to achieve it peacefully.

Larry Bernstein:

US policy towards Taiwan has historically been that of strategic ambiguity. Biden has made several comments to the press that we will defend Taiwan. Has the US abandoned strategic ambiguity? Why is there a disagreement about defending Taiwan between Biden's State Department and President Biden?

Richard Fontaine:

The Washington gaffe is defined as when a politician comes out and accidentally tells the truth or says what he thinks. This is not the first time that this has happened. George W. Bush said the same thing—that the United States would defend Taiwan. The policy is that the United States may defend Taiwan if attacked, the officials scramble to say the policy hasn't changed. We don't have a mutual defense agreement with Taiwan. There's no treaty, it would be up to the president to decide what to.

But when the president says a priori what he would do. The policy may be strategic ambiguity, but it depends on who you ask. The State Department is going to give you strategic ambiguity. But the guy who would decide that's the president.

Larry Bernstein:

Your war games had three acts. Act One was the attempted murder of the Taiwanese President and cabinet with a simultaneous Chinese surprise attack on US military forces in Hawaii and Japan. In Act Two, the Chinese take the war to the mainland United States blowing up military targets in Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Seattle and Alaska. Act Three, China explodes a nuclear bomb over the Pacific.

Why does China escalate by attacking the US mainland and then using a nuclear weapon? What were you thinking as a leader of the Red Team?

Richard Fontaine:

In the moment, certainly I tried to make decisions in accordance with the interest of the team. I don't actually wanna see China detonate a nuclear blast over the Pacific Ocean. But the thinking of the Red Team was to escalate until the Americans understood that the Chinese side cared more about Taiwan than the Americans ever would. At some point we would get to a rung on the ladder that was unsustainable for the United States. The theory was the Americans would understand that the price of continuing this war would be too high.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about as it relates to US, China and Taiwan?

Richard Fontaine:

I'm optimistic that the horrific scenario that we saw play out in this war game can be avoided through additional deterrence, some diplomacy and education of how horrible the outcome could be. Part of the reason to game 'em out is you can avoid having to face them in the first place.

Admiral James Stavridis USN:

People ask me frequently these days, how realistic is it that we could simply stumble into a war with China? Unfortunately, it is a real possibility. If you look at the basket of disagreements between the United States and China, they're big, and they're getting bigger. Think about the dispute over who owns the South China Sea, a vast body of water the size of the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico, which China claims in its entirety.

The way Hong Kong is being treated, the disputes over Taiwan, which China would very much demand become part of its loving embrace. We disagree with those positions and we see China increasing its military capability relentlessly. China has more warships today than the United States of America. Ours are better, but ton for a ton, especially if they're all packed into the South China Sea—big challenges for the US Navy. China's preparing for conflict.

How will Russia play in this particular game of thrones? We're seeing Russia and China draw closer and closer together. Their ships operate routinely, not just in the North Pacific, but in the Baltic Sea, in the heart of Europe. The last time they conducted military exercises on their mutually shared Siberian border, it was the largest military exercise since the end of the Cold War.

What about Iran? What about the role of India? I am cautiously optimistic about the rise of India, because it's a democracy, because it enjoys an enviable geographic position in the heart of the Indian Ocean, because it's already connected in many ways with the West.

We should avoid a world war with China at all costs. What are the tools to avoid war? Reading, learning, education. China understands us better than we understand China. We have work to do. We need a strong military deterrent capability—cyber, unmanned vehicles, space, hypersonics. We need that credibility and capability.

We also need allies. We need to build coalitions so we can create balance against the rising strength of China without pushing them into a corner. NATO, Japan, Australia, New Zealand. There are dangerous times ahead. If you look at human history going back 2,500 years, you'll understand that there's a looming Thucydides Trap. When an established power is challenged by a rising power, a global war ensues. It goes all the way back to Athens and Sparta. It goes back just a hundred years ago: established power Great Britain, rising power the Kaiser's Germany, World War I. We know from World War I the experience of economies and nations that are deeply intertwined. It would be incorrect to say that our economies are together therefore it's unlikely we'll end up in a global war. That's what we need to avoid and that's the purpose of the novel, 2034: A Novel of the Next World War.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Admiral. We had Graham Allison discuss the Thucydides Trap on the program. China is obviously a growing power and it has certain political and military objectives. How do we encourage China to behave in a way that it doesn't threaten our allies and encourages them to find non-military solutions to their political desires?

Admiral James Stavridis USN:

We begin by understanding their strategy and using empathy. China wants to continue to feed its very successful economy with raw materials and export finished goods. This is called sometimes One Belt One Road. It has two paths, one goes across the land to the north, the other through the Indian Ocean to the south. China will seek to expand that route.

Number two, create a strategy. The Trump administration attempted to engage with China, but they never developed a coherent strategy. The Biden team must create a strategy that integrates military, diplomacy, political activity, strategic communications, economics, and that strategy needs a very strong component of engagement.

Third, confront where we must, cooperate wherever we can. We have to confront on the South China Sea, we can't simply turn that over to China, but we should cooperate where we can. Climate and pandemic preparation, because there will be another pandemic.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned China's objectives is to feed its economy with raw materials. If you go back to World War II, the Japanese wanted to feed their economy with raw materials as well and the Americans put themselves in a position to prevent Japan from feeding its economy with raw materials, which led inexorably towards war. Is that a lesson to be learned: we shouldn't put pressure on raw material supplies?

Admiral James Stavridis USN:

What you're discussing from the Japanese Empire was what they call the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. It was a strategy that had some similarities to what China is doing today. The lesson is don't back your opponent into a corner. Sun Tzu is famous for saying the greatest

victory you will ever attain is the battle you do not fight. It is trying to outmaneuver your opponent, create alliances, form patterns that draw your enemy where you want him to go. But Sun Tzu also said, when on death ground, fight. What we want to avoid is putting our opponents in a corner where they feel they are on death ground, because then they surely will fight.

Larry Bernstein:

Professor James Holmes from the Naval War College spoke about containing the Chinese Navy in the South China Sea. What's unusual about it is it's on the Chinese border so they'll have access to the mainland to protect that space from the air and launched missiles. On the other hand, it is the Chinese mainland so they're much more at risk. How do you think about the naval exercises that will go on in that physical space, as well as the American desire to protect Taiwan from an invasion?

Admiral James Stavridis USN:

This is a very hard, pure military problem. The Chinese in this scenario have the home court advantage. All of their ports, all their logistics, their food supplies, their oil, gas, everything is right there on the mainland. They also have the ability to operate out to, James talked about this, what's called the first island chain and the second island chain.

These island chains, the reefs of islands that go from Taiwan in the south up to Japan in the north, and the Philippines are on the outer side of those rings. China is very capable of flooding the zone and covering it with hypersonic cruise missiles, potentially being directed from space. It's a very hard military problem.

The best thing the United States can do is have access to these island chains so that we can have logistics support and put pressure on the Chinese forces before they can launch at us. That becomes a very delicate dance. Just because you think that you are acting in a very measured, careful, nuanced way, your opponent may not see it that way. When on death ground, fight. When you cross a line and attack the homeland of an opponent, you really do cross a line—a pretty significant one.

Bottom line, no easy answers here. We need capable cybersecurity forces that can operate with allies, partners and friends, and be prepared to act from strength if necessary.

Larry Bernstein:

When I was in college, the primary textbook that we used in our political science class was John Louis Gaddis's book *Strategies of Containment*. In that book, Gaddis describes two different response models to deal with an opponent. The symmetric response and the asymmetric response. In your novel, it seems that the Chinese engage in an asymmetric response, they choose where we're going to attack every time, while the Americans choose a more symmetric model, where they meet aggression in a similar way. Gaddis argued that asymmetric was a better approach. Are you suggesting that symmetry is a bad idea? If the Chinese start acting aggressively in the South China Sea, should the United States then say, " We're going to support

an independent Taiwan and we may even provide them with nuclear weapons so they can protect themselves." Is that a more appropriate response than direct military engagement?

Admiral James Stavridis USN:

China is using asymmetric approaches. Their way of war comes from Sun Tzu. Sun Tzu was very much a fan of the asymmetric approach. Western powers tend to be Clausewitzian, meaning we go right up the middle very frequently.

Asymmetry is a good thing to consider, but I'm going to give you both a good and a very dangerous asymmetry. The very dangerous asymmetry is the one you suggest. An enormous red line for China is Taiwan, and the more we become tempted to "encourage them to independence," the higher the likelihood of actual combat. For decades we've had a policy that's called strategic ambiguity, meaning we haven't declared we will fight for the island of Taiwan. We imply that we would look with grave misgivings at any military move on Taiwan and we have been very measured in the military defensive systems that we sell to Taiwan.

I would say that is an asymmetric threat to China. That is very, very direct and you would want to only come to that in extremis, knowing that you are probably going to tip into active combat between the United States and China, and no one knows how that will come out.

A good example of how the United States could be using asymmetry in the South China Sea is how we use the US Marine Corps. Some of the most forward-thinking war gaming is being done by the United States Marine Corps about how they could get behind those island chains that Professor Holmes told you about. And operating from very stealthy, capable ships, conduct special operations-type activities at scale. That's an asymmetric response that is less likely to drive us directly into a major war. Pushing for Taiwanese independence, we ought to think of that as behind the glass, reserve that for the ultimate emergency.

Larry Bernstein:

Completely different question here, I want to talk about The Battle of Midway. In June 1942, Admiral Nimitz decided to throw all of our aircraft carriers at Midway. Admiral King thought this was terrible because there would be nothing between Hawaii and California to protect against an attack on the mainland. Roosevelt favored Nimitz and allowed all the aircraft carriers in the Pacific to go to Midway.

You focused on engagement with China in the South China Sea, but if I were the Chinese, I'd attack the mainland United States. As we think about our use of naval resources, how much do we have to preserve to protect the United States mainland versus containing the battle directly in the South China Sea?

Admiral James Stavridis USN:

I'd say the odds of China launching significant strikes on the United States continent are quite low because Chinese capability is somewhat limited. As you project forward to 2034, the odds go up significantly. We need to protect ourselves from an attack on the mainland US. I would say by 2034, the best way China could use asymmetric attacks against us would be using cyber,

particularly if they continue to stride ahead of us in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, machine learning. That's the real longer-term concern.

Larry Bernstein:

We had John Mearsheimer on the call and we discussed the rising Chinese power. I asked him what the role of Europe would be in this coming South China Sea confrontation. He said that the Europe would be irrelevant. As a former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, what do think of Europe's role in the a US-China conflict.

Admiral James Stavridis USN:

I am with John Mearsheimer on this one. It's unlikely that the Europeans will want to tangle with China. We want a strong, robust NATO. We want European defense spending to continue to increase; we want Europe to be able to forward deploy combat power. The British are building a second large deck aircraft carrier. The French are building a new nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. Europe spends about \$300 billion a year collectively on defense, that's more than China spends. The best way is to work closely with them. And you'll see the Biden administration do that.

Larry Bernstein:

Our next speaker on US military strategy to contain Chinese military and political power is James Holmes who is professor of Maritime Strategy at the Naval War College. He has a new book entitled Red Star Over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy.

James Holmes:

Our Navy is not going to contain China's. Sea power is no longer just about fleets. China assumes its Navy remains weaker than ours, but it hopes to combine fire power of the PLA Navy, Air Force, and Strategic Rocket Force is enough to hold us at bay long enough to accomplish its goals. Whether that means invading Taiwan, seizing the Senkaku islands or whatever.

We will do the same using the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and even Army to imprison China's Navy and merchant fleet within the first island chain. Small bodies of missile armed ground troops on the islands will fight in concert with naval and air forces around the islands, sealing off the straits to Chinese egress into the Western Pacific. We will make the first island chain into a solid wall or a metal chain as Chinese strategists sometimes call it. For example, U.S. Air Force bombers now practice dropping with precision mine fields at sea and firing long range anti-ship missiles. The Army is equipping itself with Navy missiles capable of raiding shipping.

U.S. joint forces, acting as an implement of sea power will contain Chinese joint forces within the China seas to the best of our ability. Corraling the merchant fleet puts the economic herd on China while keeping the Navy pinned up in confined waters brings a host of operational and strategic benefits. The U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard are pursuing something they

call Naval integration and have even taken to calling themselves the Naval Service, singular. We are trying to make ourselves into one fighting implement rather than three affiliated but separate services.

The Marine Corps, under General David Berger, has been driving this effort. The Marines are remaking themselves as a service that helps the Navy deny our adversaries control of the sea and eventually win it for ourselves. That is quite a departure from protracted land combat in Iraq or Afghanistan. It's why you hear Marines constantly talking about concepts like Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, or little operations in a contested environment. They are pointing to land small units on Pacific islands armed with anti-ship and anti-air missiles to help deny China's Navy access to nearby waters and skies. They will make mayhem and then skedaddle to avoid Chinese counter fire.

Our Navy is buying lots of small warships that pack a punch. The logic behind a big fleet of small ships is that we will lose ships in combat. There is no escaping that China's strategy and forces are formidable. But spreading out fire power and sensors across numerous vessels improves the ability of the fleet to fight and win. The more impressive our battle preparations are, the better our chances of deterring China from aggression. If Xi Jinping gets out of bed every morning and decides today is not the day to roll the dice, military containment will have accomplished something big.

The first island chain is ours to lose. This is our defense perimeter just as it was 50 years ago in the Cold War.

Larry Bernstein:

Our next guest is Rory Medcalf. Rory is a longtime Australian diplomat and intelligence analyst. He is currently the head of the National Security College, Australian National University. And he's the author of the book *Indo-Pacific Empire: China, America, and the Contest for the World's Pivotal Region*. Rory will be discussing methods to contain Chinese power. Rory, please go ahead.

Rory Medcalf:

What's happening with Chinese power and disruptive influence and what are the options in the contest to limit it? Perhaps not containment, but certainly to achieve a settling point that suits the interests of liberal democracies and of a rules-based order. There really is a major strategic contest across the Indo Pacific, this great maritime region spanning the Pacific and Indian oceans. This is the primary theater of China's strategic power play. And I would argue that China is working on many levels to achieve dominance.

Look at China's military modernization that we've heard about, particularly its Naval modernization. It's about economics, the geoeconomics that is the use of economics for strategic advantage, whether that's through infrastructure, through forms of investment, through attempts to dominate supply chains and critical technologies. It's a contest that's

occurring in the realm of diplomacy bilaterally, but also through regional organizations. It's a contest that's occurring through, espionage and propaganda. So, it's a mini layered game.

This is a multi-polar region. There are many powers that work here. In fact, the overstretch that's built into China's efforts to dominate such a vast region with so many countries with their own interests engaged, that very overstretch creates the conditions for pushback, for new coalitions of countries to try to set boundaries against Chinese influence.

The Indo-Pacific strategic idea energizes and mobilizes countries like Australia and Japan and India and Indonesia, these middle players, contributing to this pushback. These new middle players in these new coalitions are going to work with the United States to create a stable balance in this region that suits our values and our interests.

I'm gonna focus just briefly on Australia because Australia has really taken a lead in the last few years in demonstrating what middle players and middle powers can do. At heart Australia is modernizing its military, improving its naval and maritime capabilities so that we can defend ourselves and assist our friends.

Australia's also been very active in hardening its own national infrastructure against political interference against economic or technological sabotage. Think about the Australian position on 5G technology, for example, building our cyber capabilities and developing through our diplomacy, with countries like America, Japan and India. Australia's pursuing all of these dimensions as a way to contribute to middle power solidarity that sets limits to Chinese influence and coercion and helps the United States to engage more strongly in the Indo-Pacific. And I think the Australian experience is proving something of a role model for middle powers and democracies everywhere in the world at the moment. And that is one reason why China doesn't like it. China is bringing to bear its own levers of coercion against Australia economically and in propaganda precisely because of the example that Australia is setting.

And that goes to the final point, what are the limitations to this middle power resistance and solidarity? We've gotta be realistic about what we can achieve. And that's where solidarity really becomes a key concept. Australia and others are building coalitions where we can try to set limits to China's bad behavior, whether it's in the South China Sea, or whether it's through foreign interference in our democracies, but we can't do it alone. And we don't want to create expectations that somehow for example, a country like Australia is going to ride to India's rescue when it confronts China in the Himalayas or a country like India is going to singlehandedly help Japan, if it gets into conflict with China in the East China Sea.

We have to look at the long game that we are playing. It's about building new levels of cooperation on technology, on intelligence sharing, on supply chains and on military interoperability where middle powers can work with one another in the future, but also with the United States and importantly create the conditions that encourage the United States to continue to play a decisive role in the Indo Pacific.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's start with Rory first. You mentioned that there are these four players, America, Japan, India, Australia that will balance Chinese aggression. Can China peel off each of the players like a Bruce Lee film and fight them independently?

Rory Medcalf:

I'm not worried about the risk of China peeling off one ally at a time. China has achieved the extraordinary feat in recent years of alienating all of us at once. I don't think China's gonna intimidate individual countries to such an extent that they don't lend any assistance at all to their partners during time of crisis.

It's going to be the US Alliance system that drives the more formal responses to acts of coercion or aggression. Japan and Australia are not treaty allies with one another, but it's very difficult to imagine a situation where the United States gets involved in military confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific and we don't. We will very likely have a role to play, even if it's an intelligence role and a support role, rather than always a frontline combat role. It's a long game.

Larry Bernstein:

I don't really understand Chinese objectives. Why is China being so aggressive, and upsetting the very people who are both the suppliers and the consumers of their goods?

Rory Medcalf:

There is a dynamic inside China that quite inextricably ties the power and control of the Chinese Communist Party with external assertiveness. The party needs to provide the Chinese people something in response for their obedience and Xi thinks permanent legitimacy can't just be economic growth. It's gotta be national power, national pride, a sense of siege against the rest of the world. This need for intensified authoritarian control at home has become tied with nationalist assertiveness abroad.

So China is actually disrupting the very regional strategic environment that it ought to be trying to stabilize. We'd all like to see the Chinese communist party move back to a moderate reformist path that it seemed to be on 20 years ago. That does not seem to be the case under this leadership. Instead, there's a certain inevitability now to the dynamics of confrontation and crisis. Australian perceptions of this have changed profoundly in the past few years and more and more Australians now see China, at least as much as a source of risk, as of economic opportunity.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's use Taiwan as the case study. Very recently Hong Kong had certain treaty rights. These rights were violated, but there was a sense like, well, it's part of China. What do you expect Australia to do? And do you think that this halfhearted support of Hong Kong will be similar to what will be done in Taiwan?

Rory Medcalf:

It's a great question. It's really important not to look at any of these things in isolation. The betrayal of Hong Kong and the betrayal of the one country, two systems agreement that China had signed onto has sent a very powerful signal to the region and the world. There's difficulty with trusting China to abide by agreements. And that has shaken opinion in Taiwan. Taiwan needs to stick to self-protection. Yes, of course there was a half-heartedness to the reactions of a lot of countries internationally, including Australia in the sense that there are limits to what we can do to protect the rights of Hong Kongers, but there certainly was diplomatic outcry.

And importantly, there's now the building of increasing solidarity, with other democracies finding ways to hold China to account. We've gotta bring the Europeans into this conversation, but in the end Hong Kong was always going to be extremely difficult in this regard. Taiwan is different. Not just for Australia, but for Japan and for a whole range of other countries in the region. The big question is what happens if China uses coercion or actual force against Taiwan? This would depend on the circumstances, but I have great difficulty imagining a US-led response to Chinese coercion or attack on Taiwan that would not ultimately involve Australia, Japan, and others. You could actually see the Quad come into play in those circumstances. You could even envisage a situation where, short of warfare, China conducts blockades of Taiwan, causing great damage to the regional economy. And as a result, other countries, including Quad members, have to impose their own responses against China.

Larry Bernstein:

Can the Quad contain Chinese aggression in Taiwan?

Rory Medcalf:

If we can demonstrate a willingness to pay the economic price for taking a stand against China, then I think over time, as long as China does not succeed in isolating us individually, we are going to bring about change.

China's rather extreme behavior in recent years is a product of two things. One: a kind of overconfidence. There was a premature perception of American decline. America is far from finished in this region but there's also a sense of quiet desperation on the part of China. China has huge problems that will come home to roost, whether it's an aging demographic, the environmental and other problems internally, the mistrust that China has sewn in so many countries around the region. All of these things are going to get more difficult for China over time. So, if China wants to lock in its power and its gains, now is the time to do it. So now is the time for us to set limits that may become easier to sustain 10 or 20 years from now.

Larry Bernstein:

I have a question about the military and Naval strategy in the Pacific. Before Pearl Harbor, America thought that battleships were gonna be critical naval vehicle. It turned out that American military strategy in the Pacific was focused on the aircraft carrier and island hopping. But technology has changed dramatically since the last time we had a major Pacific war. What

will a Naval war look like in the South China Sea and what will be the key ingredients to project power from the island of Taiwan? How does technology change the game?

James Holmes:

Military technology has come a long way since the second World War. We have guided missiles, radar. Somebody back then, would've been thunderstruck at some of the new technologies that have come about. China's strategy, is an anti-access scenario. It's about using shore-based aircraft, shore-based missiles, and just an array of instruments to augment the power of the Navy fleet.

It's very much the same idea the Japanese had in the 1920s and the 1930s until they switched and attacked Pearl Harbor. They were expecting the US Pacific fleet to steam across the Pacific at the outbreak of war. They figured out how to use land-based aircraft to seize Pacific islands, put planes on 'em use submarines and so forth to essentially subject the Pacific fleet to death of a thousand cuts before a decisive Naval engagement somewhere in the Western Pacific. That's what China has in mind here. They expect our Pacific fleet will come from the West Coast and Hawaii and that they will start cutting us down to size as we come across the Pacific. The South China Sea, Taiwan, whatever the theater of conflict is, they wanna slow us down so that they can get what they want before we can actually intervene.

Larry Bernstein:

We have Daniel Markey with us who is a professor of international Relations at Johns Hopkins SAIS and the author of China's Western Horizon.

Daniel Markey:

This is Dan here. I was wondering if I could just ask a question James. Chris Brose's book, The Kill Chain. At the core of it, he's pretty pessimistic about the US investment in exquisite, complicated platforms that cost an enormous amount to build and are relatively easier to target by Chinese forces. He'd like to see a much wider investment in a lot of cheaper, more disposable forces, but ones that could still pack a punch. His concern is that the United States is not capable of actually turning the corner in that way. I wondered what makes you more optimistic?

James Holmes:

The service is actually embracing this idea of distributed lethality. That's an accomplishment to take seriously. The Navy, the Marines, and the other services were very slow to come to terms with the China challenge. Having at least admitted it's a problem, once we set ourselves on that trajectory, I think we're gonna be alright.

It's definitely not an unequivocally rosy picture. But the trend lines are starting to turn in our favor. Getting Congress to buy into things like unmanned technologies, we're having a hard time. Because the Navy, since the turn of the century has had a series of failed acquisition or at least ones that really underperform, whether it's the Ford aircraft carrier or the literal combat ship. There's definitely a political job to be done selling these concepts to Congress so that they

actually will fund and endorse it because ultimately, they're the ones who make strategic decisions.

Larry Bernstein:

James, do you think the Chinese will attack the US mainland in a China-US military engagement?

James Holmes:

The idea is to keep them in the China seas where we can blockade them or sink them. We're trying to limit their ability to bring it to our own shores. Obviously controlling the first island chain doesn't necessarily keep them from going over the first island chain with aircraft and missiles.

Certainly in the national security community today, war gaming is really making a comeback. It's like the 1930s with the war gaming in Newport vis-à-vis Imperial Japan. If I were China, basically throw us a roundhouse punch and evade the brunt of our offensive. You might actually see that happen.

Larry Bernstein:

Dan Markey, what does Russia think of China's rising military strength?

Daniel Markey:

How Russia will ultimately respond to a creeping, if not a galloping degree of Chinese economic, political, and even military influence? You really have to see this at least at two levels. Both of them are more concerned about the United States and to a lesser extent Western Europe and East Asia. For Russia, it's pressure over issues like Ukraine. For China it's global strategic competition.

Since Moscow and Beijing see us as the problem, they see a lot of reasons to work together. You're right that Putin and Xi Jinping are closer together in many ways than we've seen China and Russia in decades. However, in continental Eurasia are a number of points of potential friction between the two of them. Russia, which has enjoyed the traditional place as the dominant security player throughout central Asia would not sit idly by and let China eat its lunch, if not for the fact that it was principally occupied dealing with us.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Richard Fontaine, Admiral James Staviridis, James Holmes, Daniel Markey, and Rory Medcalf for joining us today. That ends this session.

If you missed last week's podcast, check it out. We had Mark Galoetti discuss Putin and Ukraine. I think what you will find interesting is why Putin thought invading Ukraine would be a cake walk and that why there is little chance he can extricate himself from the current situation.

I would like to make a plug for next week's show. Our speaker will be John Ellis from UC Santa Cruz and he will discuss the corruption of the humanities and what topics that you cannot teach.

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I would like to thank our audience for your continued engagement with these important issues, good-bye.