

Benefits of Anarchy vs. City Planning and Defending Taiwan

What Happens Next – 10.31.2021

James Holmes QA

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Jim. That was fantastic. I want to start with cheap and effective ways of defending Taiwan. You had an article that was published a few weeks ago, which I assigned to the audience about using of mines to protect against amphibious attack and that these mines can be placed within 24 hours. Can you comment a little bit about the effectiveness of these mines? Why it would work as a defense mechanism and its general efficacy?

Jim Holmes:

Mines have always been one of the most difficult, in fact, anything underwater remains a really difficult threat, simply because of the nature of water itself, which is why we worry so much about submarines, mines, torpedoes, all those sorts of things that can remain obscure from our sensors, and obviously from our eyeballs. I guess you can think all the way back to the Battle of Mobile Bay during the Civil War, but especially in the late 19th and into the 20th century, they've been a real problem for Navies. In fact, I was up in the Gulf in 1991 and I can remember seeing them float down the side of the ship and think, "Thank heaven we didn't hit any," but a couple of ships were not so fortunate.

It's a perennial problem. It's something that we're always trying to make work, but at the same time, if this is a hard problem for ourselves, it's also a hard problem for China, which is a rather sort of a late comer to under underwater operations, and therefore it has a hard time with anti-submarine warfare, with mind sweeping and so forth. I mean, that's an opportunity for the United States and its allies right there. Just to be able to resort to this sort of cheap and proven mode of warfare.

Combine that with geography. I mentioned the first island chain that are narrow seas that penetrate through the island chain, and they're great places for mine fields. You now have the United States Air Force practicing dropping mine fields from bombers. There's just a lot going on in this area. Again, combining geography with the new and old technology, can provide that sort of strategic advantage.

Larry Bernstein:

I'm going to go through a couple historical island invasions as a way of thinking about Taiwan. I'm going to do two different questions, but to just kind of get you ready. I'm going to talk about Midway and I'm going to talk about Crete, and I'm going to start with Midway first.

When we broke the Japanese code and figured out the Japanese were going to invade Midway, one of the first things that the United States did was it improved the defense of Midway, on the island itself. They beefed up the airport, they beefed up other areas around the island to protect against invasion, and I think that's a very cheap and effective means of preventing an amphibious attack. If you were going to recommend defending Taiwan, how would you do it? Would you recommend having U.S. ground troops, the U.S. Air Force having a base there? Or how would you recommend that Taiwan think about protecting itself against a potential amphibious attack? Away from mines?

Jim Holmes:

Yeah, that's a great question, and it's one that I think tank world people have been thinking about it for quite some time. I think it's about 20 years ago, a team at RAND, they did a historical comparison. They basically mapped out the potential landing beaches on Taiwan, and then they overlaid that over the beaches at Normandy, and it's almost the same size theater, and it's just about as difficult. The first thing Taiwan needs to do is think about how to use the island's geography, the island itself and its surrounding maritime geography as strategic assets, as operational assets.

One of my favorite passages comes from a theorist we don't think about too much these days. Moltke the Elder, on the military side, the founder of Imperial Germany in the 1870s. He maintained that essentially possession is nine tenths of the law in strategy. What he means by this is that if you already hold the ground, if you already hold what somebody else is trying to take, you have advantages just by possession. Tactical defense is the strongest form of warfare. In the case of Taiwan, Taiwan already holds that ground and China has to come across 90 plus miles of water in order to take it. Of course, the straight is narrow. It's susceptible to, again, mine warfare, submarines, but also surface patrol craft armed with missiles. A lot of these small and cheap capabilities could basically flood the zone and give the People's Liberation Army Navy a very difficult time coming across the Taiwan Strait in force, so there's a lot there.

I think that the other aspect to this, especially for the PLA, or excuse me, especially for the Taiwan Air Force and the Taiwan Navy is they really need, basically a culture change, I guess you might say. For a long time, during the cold war and really into the 1970s, when we revoked our recognition for Taiwan, I mean, culturally they've basically grown up... They were almost like clients of the United States Armed Forces, and they seemed to soak up that, soak up the assumptions that we have in the United States Navy and the United States Air Force. Namely, that we were going to fight a big battle and rule the sky or rule the sea.

Taiwan could get away with that for a long time, because the PLA remained large, but sort of backward and ponderous, and not very good. Taiwan could convince itself that by being technologically, and in the human sense, superior to the mainland's armed forces, that it could

hope to prevail in a battle for maritime command or aerial command. That's an attitude that I think has long outlived its usefulness as the PLA becomes a serious competitor, and I think the Taiwanese really need to give up on these assumptions, and think more like gorillas. I mean, they can even investigate China's past, back during the days of Mao Zedong. I mean, think about how the Red Army under Mao overcame the Nationalists and ultimately the Imperial Japanese as well, even though it was the weaker party.

Taiwan is now the weaker party, and I think it needs to embrace that assumption and think about how to do things in a different way. If it does that, and I think if it goes to multitudes of all these small cheap capabilities, I think it has a chance of deterring China and frustrating China's aims if China does use force. Taiwan's not without options.

Larry Bernstein:

Let me try the battle of Crete for a second as another example. John Keegan, a very famous military historian wrote a book entitled, *Intelligence in War: The Value--And Limitations*, and in this book, there's a chapter on the Battle of Crete. The point that Keegan was making was, even with perfect information, you can still lose.

But I think that that is interesting in its own right from a strategic standpoint, so here's the deal. We've broken the German code, and we find out that the Germans are planning to invade Crete at a specific time, and we know exactly what they're going to do. They're going to drop guys out of parachutes where the target is the Iraklion, which is the capital city's airport, and they're going to take the airport. Once they take the airport they're going to fly in and land thousands of troops and take the island.

The individual leading the allied forces is a Kiwi commander, and the Kiwi commander is instructed by the allied forces to defend at all costs the airport, to give up on the sea as a concern of its attack, and they say exactly where the parachutists are going to be landing. They put the machine gun guys right where the parachutists going to come in, but they really don't add a lot of troops to the airport, because the Kiwi commander is still very concerned about an amphibious attack. The Germans land, and there's a tremendous loss of life for the parachutists, but enough get through, they're able to take the airport. The Germans are able to land thousands of troops and Crete is lost.

The reason I bring up this, this is an aside, when Hitler hears about the percentage of parachutists that were killed, he then thinks that he's never going to do this approach in battle again, not knowing that we had broken the code where they were going to land. He also thought that would make it very prohibitively expensive when we landed at Normandy, for fear that the parachutists would get killed just like the Germans, though the Germans didn't know where were going to land.

The reason I bring up the story with you, Jim, is how important is the defense of the airports to landing Chinese troops, to do a battle of the Crete attack on Taiwan? Do you think that in lieu of an amphibious attack, they could do something more from the air, to land troops?

Jim Holmes:

would say it's a serious concern. I'm not actually an air power specialist, but just in general terms, I mean, the airports are obviously important for a lot of reasons. I suppose, especially for the Taiwan Air Force, which unwisely I think, has continued to pour lots of resources into F-16 fighters and whatnot. Sort of high-cost platforms that they could use these resources for other stuff, and I think they would be well off doing, but sort of, for defensive reasons, that's important. Every year they practice landing fighter aircraft on highways and so forth, just as a contingency in case they do lose those facilities to a Chinese attack, which they might, but again, just like you say, these are also valuable facilities to the Chinese.

I have a hard time seeing them primarily... I mean, think about the size of Taiwan. The population of Taiwan is about 24 million people. It's really hard to imagine them being able to airlift or to do a sort of the paratroop operation along the lines of Crete against a target that size. This is a large rugged island, it's well suited to conducting an insurgency as the island has seen in the past. It's going to take a lot of manpower for the PLA to get across the Taiwan Strait. I'm sure there will be an air component, but the fact is that manpower and especially military resources, heavy military resources are going to come by sea, and therefore I think the maritime aspect is probably still the key one.

Larry Bernstein:

Winning without a fight, that's got to be strategy number one. I'm thinking about it in the context of, what about a little fight? Taiwan, like England, it needs food. It's an export country, it needs access to the sea. Could the Chinese set up a blockade around which they would prevent vessels coming in and out? Could they force a long-dated problem where they couldn't feed their people? Could they also just blow up a bunch of their industries in a low-cost aerial attack that would make it prohibitive to get the Taiwanese to the negotiating table? I've heard that when they do the war games, China wins just about every time. What are these weaknesses that Taiwan has that allows China with low cost, to really force the Taiwanese to the bargaining table, to give up everything?

Jim Holmes:

Let me take the second part first, and then come back to the question that you opened with. I mean, I think you're alluding to Taiwanese willpower. I would suggest, I think it's actually pretty good. I mean, we know that when you estimate a contender's strength, it's a compound of material capabilities, military power, economics, and all that kind of stuff, but then obviously the willpower to actually use those things to get your way. In this case, Taiwan preserving its own de facto independence and national survival. I actually think it's pretty good. They're

always doing polls in Taiwan to try to figure out exactly how hard the population would be prepared to fight. I think it's actually gotten better over the years as the Taiwanese define themselves less and less as Chinese and more and more as their own nation, so I think that's actually a good thing.

The cultural component, the willpower component is probably the key. I think they could actually sustain a fair amount of damage before they would be forced to acquiesce. That leads me to what I would say to your first question, which I think, where it comes down to speed. China wants to win fast. In fact, I think China needs to win fast in the Taiwan Strait, so that they can actually conquer that island, if it decides to mount an invasion. Conquer the island before the United States and its allies can rally to Taiwan's defense. If you're talking about, like you said, economic attacks or blockade, or whatnot, I mean, these are slow moving strategies and they would give the United States and its allies, and Taiwan that time that they need to rally to Taiwan's defense, and go in and mount enough force to reverse aggression. So, I think Taiwan, or excuse me, China rather, will not go with a really slow-moving strategy, like a blockade as a standalone thing. Obviously if they're going to mount an attack, they're going to try to cordon off the island and do damage to it. But I don't think they would do these things as the centerpiece of their strategy, just because that factor of time.

Larry Bernstein:

There was an article in the Wall Street Journal of all places, a front-page story this week about both Taiwan's will of fight and their preparation. And the article specifically was asking the question, "Will the young men of Taiwan, will they fight? And are they prepared to fight in any meaningful way?" And there's a sense of comparison versus the Israelis with their reserve army, where they go to work or one month a year they're out there preparing, thinking about it, fully engaged, and then treating it as an existential threat. Obviously, if the Israelis are taken over by, I don't know the Syrians or something, it's end of days, it's end of the world, they're going to get killed. Versus, the Taiwanese, they're going to get taken over by their fellow Chinese. Yeah, Hong Kong lost, but they're still alive, they didn't massacre them. And now have to die, is the alternative.

How do you think about Taiwan's decision not to build reserves, not to ingrain the military ethos among their young people? Is it too late? Can they turn that around? Will that have high dividends, or should they spend their resources more on planes, and mines, and submarines?

Jim Holmes:

Well, I'm not entirely sure there's a choice between ingraining the military ethos within Taiwan, and investing in other things, but you're right to cause attention to this. I think actually Taiwan's on the right track. In terms of national willpower, but yeah, I saw that Wall Street Journal piece, it appeared in the Navy's daily news clip this weekend. And I think that is a serious problem if they're not actually creating sizable and well-trained reserves. There were some suggestions

that they basically just used recruits to do odd jobs. I'm really starting to get a little bit out of touch with this, but I think national service in Taiwan is only nine months now. Man, can you really make a soldier, a sailor, or anything else, in nine months and then turn that person back to civilian?

I think that is sort of a worrisome fact if indeed I'm right about that, and I think I am. I think we are talking about a cultural change that needs to happen in Taiwan. President Tsai has been very good on weapons programs and whatnot, but you don't get the sense that she's devoted a whole lot of attention to that aspect of military preparedness. And I don't want to rosy a picture on Taiwan, my sense is that the trends are going okay in the sense, but at the same time, if you look at what Taiwan spends on defense, it's basically on a peace time about 2% of their GDP on the military.

That's standard in Europe, but at the same time Taiwan stands on death ground to use our senses for it. As you said, it faces national ruin, but yet it's not spending like, it actually takes that very seriously, which suggests that they might still be dependent on the United States, they simply assume that we'll come to the rescue. I think that it's an assumption that has outlived its usefulness, because Xi, I think Taiwan wants to win fast, the United States wants to slow things down so that they can actually get to the scene of battle. But, yeah, it would be good to see Taiwan take a bigger share in its own defense.

Also, I would like Japan as well. Japan's actually moving pretty fast by Japanese standard, as started to talk about actually defending Taiwan, that being an important thing. Japan's talking about doubling its own defense budget.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's go to the United States and us defending Taiwan, and the signals you're trying to send. President Biden was recently interviewed by the press, a question more than once. And Biden said, unequivocally, the United States currently has obligations and will do everything in its power to defend Taiwan. And the journalist said, "Actually, that really isn't true." And he said, "No, no, it is true." And then hours later, the administration's press secretary clarified the position back to the current position, which was the ambiguity for Taiwan, unclear of whether or not the US would defend Taiwan. What are your thoughts on, I'll it the incredibly ambiguous US policy towards defending Taiwan, whether we will, or we won't? How is that perceived in China? How will that be perceived in Taiwan? How will that be perceived in Japan or the world? And does it matter?

Jim Holmes:

Well, I think it does matter. I think we're sort of at a nexus where we're having to rethink all the assumptions you're alluding. Yeah, President Biden, I was actually excited when he did that, but then I also expected the people in Washington to start walking it back, just as they did actually

one previous about the time of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States could be relied upon to keep its promises in international politics, so it came up in that context as well, and the same thing happened back then.

The policy of strategic ambiguity, the basic idea behind it is we were to deter both our ally, or our friend in this case, our informal ally, Taiwan, and also China. We want to deter Taiwan from declaring independence, something that China has repeatedly stated as a red line for war. And in fact, they had written it into Chinese law back in 2005. And we also want to obviously deter China from attacking Taiwan and trying to settle things by force. But I think that made sense as long as the Chinese threat was pretty remote, but that's really not reality anymore. Over the last quarter century or thereabouts, the PLA has made itself into a serious fighting force, and one that we have to take seriously. And I think that warrants rethinking strategic ambiguity.

A lot of times when people ask this question, and they seem to be insinuating that they want to stick with strategic ambiguity, I always ask... Well, think about theories of alliance building and preservation, do you ever want to issue a non-binding promise to defend somebody? Do you really want to be ambiguous about keeping our promises in nature, under the North Atlantic treaty, or to Japan under the US Japan security treaty? If it's a good idea to be ambiguous, maybe we should rethink our other relationships. I never really get a good answer out of that one, but I'm not sure why Taiwan would be the exceptions to that.

Larry Bernstein:

From your introductory remarks, Jim, you mentioned that sometimes by being very clear about what your objectives are, you paint yourself in a corner, and by making it something non-negotiable position, you paint yourself in a corner. And we've done the opposite, we have not painted ourself in the corner. It's unclear what hell we're going to do in Taiwan.

Jim Holmes:

Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

Isn't that really exactly what you want?

Jim Holmes:

Well, if I'm issuing a commitment, a steadfast commitment to an ally, I don't want anybody to doubt that. Yeah. I think that's a fair point, but if you leave that in the minds of the person you're trying to deter, or the country you're trying to deter, at that point, the deterrent starts to break down. I think that's a little bit different situation, although, I think some of the psychological dynamics are similar. But again, do we really want Japan to worry about whether we will keep our commitments to Japan in times of war, or whatever? If they do, what's their

natural response? Japan might start thinking about loosening up its commitment to the alliance, perhaps even denying us access to their soil. That way lies madness. I think that's a case in which you want to be very clear.

Kissinger, in the early sixties, put out a book on deterrence, and he defined the deterrence as a product of three things. First of all, it's just basically capability. The ability to do what you say you will. You issue a threat, which is what the deterrence is all about, and also the willpower to use that under the circumstances that you say you will. So, there's that element of strength that I mentioned before. And the last one is belief. The last variable is belief. And the belief on the party that you're trying to deter, that you will actually use your capabilities under the circumstances that you say you will, and you will inflict upon the punishment, or deny them their aims that you're trying to forbid. So that's really where the rubber meets the road, that belief variable. If I'm saying that I may or may not keep my promise to an ally, then it's natural that that belief variable is going to start to degrade.

Kissinger, he has one more, and he actually adds a coda to this little formula as well. He notes that this is about multiplying these three variables. And therefore, if any one of the three variables is zero, so is deterrence. I can have all the capability and all the willpower in the world, if the other side doesn't believe me, then at that point I'm not going to deter. And that's a bad thing in this case.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to try something crazy by you, and you can just reject out of hand, and that is nuclear weapons. What would happen if Taiwan announced tomorrow that it had nuclear weapons and was prepared to use it to defend the nation?

Jim Holmes:

Well, that's a very good question, Taiwan had a nuclear program, an undisclosed nuclear program several decades ago, and basically disbanded it at the behest of the United States. A lot of it is whether you think they could actually stage a nuclear breakout overnight. They do have nuclear power plants, and therefore they have the expertise and potentially the materials to do this, but staging a nuclear breakout generally does not happen sort of by surprise like that. Now, if you assume that you could do that, then that could be a game changer, but again, it would depend on the size of the arsenal. Could they actually do enough damage to China to actually deter China, and on and on, so you'd have to start analyzing all the elements of deterrence.

For anybody who hasn't studied deterrence, nuclear deterrence, basically the gold standard of nuclear deterrence is the ability to carry out a second strike even after suffering a first strike from your adversary. It's kind of hard to imagine that Taiwan would come up with a nuclear arsenal that would give it that invulnerable second-strike capability overnight. This would be a project that would probably take some time.

Larry Bernstein:

Just to defend indefensible, imagine that Taiwan announced it had six nuclear weapons. Would that be enough to deter China from doing an attack?

Jim Holmes:

First of all, how much punishment is China willing to absorb, to win a war with Taiwan. I'd say if dropping a nuclear bomb on Shanghai or something like that, is that above or below the Chinese threshold for absorbing damage for the sake of Taiwan?

I think there's also an aspect of this as well, this is very valuable ground we're talking about in Taiwan. To what extent would China actually be willing to use nuclear weapons against Taiwan, even in retaliation for a Taiwanese nuclear attack? It wants to possess the ground for all the reasons that I cataloged, and I think that's something that bears looking into as well. By the way, you mentioned the figure of half a dozen nuclear weapons. That's actually one of the most peculiar, one of the weirdest cases in nuclear history, was South Africa under the apartheid regime, actually built a force of six tactical nuclear weapons for bizarre reasons. And they wanted to basically compel the United States to come to South Africa's aid in times of war against its neighbors, simply by disclosing that they had a force of six tactical nuclear weapons, kind of just a bizarre story. And I think the Taiwanese breakout in the same category as well.

Larry Bernstein:

My final question for you is, we've been analyzing Taiwan as an area that it's weak, and it has prepared itself against attack, but China itself is also weak. It has a very fast-growing economy with more than a billion people doing very well, and it has not built its country on the defense in case of attack. What is China's weak underbelly? How can Taiwan bring the war to China to undermine or deter Xi from waking up that morning, and not choosing to attack.

Just is a little background, a show what happens next, we had Allen Guelzo speak about his biography of Robert E. Lee a couple weeks ago.

And what Guelzo said was that if you were to ask Robert E. Lee for his strategy in the US Civil War, it was to attack Pennsylvania and Maryland, and just run wild, cause chaos. And then you had some midterm elections coming up in 1862, and that's how you win the war. If you were going to deter China from attacking Taiwan, would the Taiwanese want to blow up one of those big super-container boats in the port, limit the ability to have them do any exports, fire submarine missiles and do tremendous damage to chemical plants, creating an environmental disaster in China. It's a two-way street, it's a mutual destruction. How should we think about China's soft underbelly?

Jim Holmes:

Well, you're making this a very military question, and I think that's certainly a key aspect of it, but when you talk about the Chinese soft underbelly, I think you're talking more in grand strategic terms, and I think that's entirely fitting. I'm not one of the ones who, and I always paint a pretty dark picture when I talk about China and its capabilities. And I think that in the military sense that's entirely fitting, because it's becoming a serious problem. But if you look at some of the major trend lines in China over the next coming years and decades, China does have a lot of problems. You mentioned the environment, and that's been a catastrophe ever since John King Fairbank wrote his famous histories of China many decades ago. I don't think that things have really improved all that much, certainly not out in the countryside, in the cities or gleaming and so forth. But out in the countryside, I think they still have a lot of problems. So that's a drain on China's resources that it might put into security.

Other things, demographics. Demographics, I know China has abolished the one child rule, but it was in place for an awful long time, and they're going to have to deal with the consequences of an aging population. So that'll be another drain on Chinese resources. There are internal security problems, if you look, it's kind of hard for us to know specifically how bad this is, but if you look at the Chinese defense budget, about half of it goes to internal security. The people's armed police soaked up a large part of the Chinese defense spending. And that is not the behavior of a comfortable regime that thinks it's securely in power. And things like social credit scores, and all those kinds of stuff that the Xi Zhou paint, and the Chinese communist party are usually trying to keep the population in check. That suggests they have something to worry about, and I think that that's actually fair.

So again, some of these trends are going to wear away at China's long-term prospects. We're doing things against Taiwan and elsewhere in the world. However, before I round out this very longwinded answer, that doesn't mean that China is not dangerous today. They teach that sometimes even if you're the weaker adversary today, it might make a sense to start a fight today, if you think the trendlines are going against you, and you would be in a worse place next year. Even if China thinks its rise is cresting, and perhaps even dissenting, could be a very dangerous China. And I think that warrants our attention as well.

Larry Bernstein:

Okay. I end each session on a note of optimism. Jim, tell me what are you optimistic about?

Jim Holmes:

If you look closely at what's going on in China, in the United States, actually in the US military, I actually feel fairly upbeat. For example, I'm an old surface sailor, so I think in terms of anti-ship missiles, we were vastly outranged by the Chinese PLA Navy until recent years. They could take missile shots at us long before we could close the range to return fire. Serious several things that have happened, repurposing existing technology, reinventing old technology. And we're actually correcting that problem. And I feel much more upbeat than I did about five years ago.

Larry Bernstein:

Jack Katz, what are you optimistic about?

Jack Katz:

Okay. The history of neighborhood development since 1965, in Hollywood and many other city areas, shows that anarchy need not be feared. Anarchy isn't a permanent condition. Withdrawal of government power to structure social areas is not destructive to collective life. In diverse and unpredictable ways, that local residents have an ability to organize collective responses, even without coordination from above or across neighborhoods. We should be optimistic that cities will continue to grow around historic nodes of density, and that while with an increasingly well-educated and highly paid population, some vibrant, low-income ethnic neighborhoods will decline future mass entries of the foreign born, which appears to be mounting very quickly, should create other vibrant new neighborhoods in the near future.

Larry Bernstein:

Jack, thank you so much.