

# Defeating Deception

## *Outthinking Chinese Deception in a Taiwan Invasion*

by MAJ Thomas L. Haydock, PhD, USA



# **Defeating Deception**

## *Outthinking Chinese Deception in a Taiwan Invasion*

by Major Thomas L. Haydock, PhD, U.S. Army

Land Warfare Paper No. 162, July 2024

**Defeating Deception:  
Outthinking Chinese Deception in a Taiwan Invasion**

by Major Thomas L. Haydock, PhD, U.S. Army

Major Thomas Haydock is a 2024 graduate of the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS). Prior to SAMS, he was the battalion executive officer and battalion operations officer for the 3-161 IN (Dark Rifles). He is currently the Strategic Plans & Policy Officer (G5) for the Washington Army National Guard.

**An Association of the United States Army Publication**

The Association of the United States Army (AUSA) informs and educates its members, local, regional and national leaders and the American public on subjects related to the U.S. Army. AUSA provides educational materials and resources such as publications, forums, symposia, books and podcasts for Soldiers, their families and anyone seeking to learn more about the Total Army.

The views and opinions of our authors do not necessarily reflect those of the Association of the United States Army. An article selected for publication represents research by the author(s) which, in the opinion of the Association, will contribute to the discussion of a particular defense or national security issue. These articles should not be taken to represent the views of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, the United States government, the Association of the United States Army or its members.

Inquiries regarding this and future Land Warfare Papers should be directed to: Nzinga A. Curry, Director, Education & Programs, 2425 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, VA 22201, email [ncurry@ausa.org](mailto:ncurry@ausa.org) or telephone 703-907-2636.

© Copyright 2024 by  
The Association of the United States Army  
All rights reserved.

# Contents

In Brief .....	v
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: What Is So Hard about Invading Taiwan? .....	2
Chapter 2: How Would China Likely Invade? .....	5
Chapter 3: Deception Theory and Doctrine.....	6
Categories and Types of Military Deception .....	7
Example (DISO into MILDEC): Chinese Intervention in the Korean War .....	8
Are Modern Chinese Deception Theory and Doctrine Drastically Different? .....	11
Chapter 4: Deception for History’s Most Difficult Invasion.....	12
Indicators .....	17
Conclusion .....	19
Notes .....	22



## **In Brief**

- China will almost certainly use deception for any potential amphibious invasion of Taiwan. Anticipating and envisioning possible operational approaches to deception is essential to avoiding surprise and to defeating deception.
- Using deception history, theory and doctrine to envision how China could use deception at the strategic and operational levels of war to support an amphibious invasion of Taiwan, this paper highlights the indicators that the United States should look for to avoid falling victim to the deception.
- This paper first outlines the challenges faced by China as a potential invader and then reviews wargame results on potential invasions. It subsequently combines those conclusions with history, theory and doctrine to develop an operational approach for how China might employ deception to gain strategic- and operational-level advantages.
- This operational approach focuses on China embracing risk and seeking a decisive battle; it also includes several novel deception ruses and develops indicators to help spot and defeat this deception.
- An expanded version of this paper, including a second operational approach to deception, is available from the author on request ([thomas.l.haydock.mil@army.mil](mailto:thomas.l.haydock.mil@army.mil)).



## **Defeating Deception: Outthinking Chinese Deception in a Taiwan Invasion**

### **Introduction**

How could China use deception at the strategic and operational levels of war to support an amphibious invasion of Taiwan, and what are the indicators that the United States should look for to not fall victim to the deception? This paper aims to answer these questions, which requires three things. First, it requires an understanding of the problem of how monstrously hard an invasion would be (chapter 1). Second, it needs insight into how experts believe an invasion would occur, i.e., potential Chinese solutions to the invasion problem (chapter 2). Third, it needs an overview of deception history, theory and doctrine, with an emphasis on Chinese deception (chapter 3). Armed with this three-pronged understanding, we can then develop an operational approach (OA) for how China might employ deception to gain strategic and operational level advantages (chapter 4). Finally, in the Conclusion, we will analyze the indicators to distinguish potential Chinese approaches so that the United States does not fall victim.

Although predictions and wargame results are publicly available, this paper is necessary because those thought experiments do not account for particularly Chinese deception—and so those wargames miss one of the most dangerous elements in virtually every major operation.<sup>1</sup> From Normandy's 1944 D-Day landings to China's 1950 Korean War intervention, and in Desert Storm in 1991, deception has provided incredible advantages. For example, the masterful Trojan Horse deception overcame what years of war could not. At almost no cost, and with minor risk, the Greeks triumphed by hiding their infiltration force inside a "gifted" wooden horse that the Trojans triumphantly brought into the city. At night, the infiltration force enabled the Greek assault force to enter unopposed and seize Troy. From its antiquity and current doctrine, it is clear that China also views deception as integral and highly valued and will almost certainly use it in any invasion.<sup>2</sup>

Deception can gain surprise by intermixing truth with falsehood. Zvi Lanir's *Fundamental Surprises* provides four intuitive concepts relating to surprise and deception which will serve as elemental theory until we reach chapter 3.<sup>3</sup> The first two concepts are *signals* and *noise*: the truth (signals) can be hard to discern in the midst of overwhelming activity (noise).<sup>4</sup> Deception seeks to hide signals by camouflaging it as noise (or noise as signals), by increasing noise or by shrinking the signal. The second two concepts are *situational surprise* and *fundamental surprise*.<sup>5</sup> Situational surprise is understandable and expected, such as a feint in war. In contrast, fundamental surprise is astonishment, forcing you to reexamine yourself: deception can enable both.

Chapter 4 is this paper's heart. It combines deception theory with open-source information on a potential invasion to develop an OA of how China might employ deception to gain advantage. This OA is built to fit an array of conditions, from political to tactical. For instance, while China could time an invasion and supporting deception around American or Taiwanese elections, weather patterns, or similar, this ignores those to avoid anchoring the timing or conditions. Further, while China may have already begun deception in support of an eventual invasion, such as portraying false military readiness, this paper focuses on events immediately preceding an invasion, not on years-long deception.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to reduce American surprise in the event of an invasion. Furthermore, it intends to supplement the 2023 report on unclassified wargames conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on a Chinese amphibious invasion of Taiwan. It uses history, theory and doctrine to begin anticipating deception. As a result, it fills a CSIS gap to better guide U.S. Indo-Pacific Command counter-invasion planning, preparation and execution at the strategic and operational levels. It generates ideas for plausible deception for finding the real signal in the noise and for preventing situational and fundamental surprise in what could be our greatest trial since World War II.

## **Chapter 1: What Is So Hard about Invading Taiwan?**

*Unlike Normandy, the coastal terrain here is a defender's dream come true. Taiwan has only 14 small invasion beaches, and they are all bordered by cliffs and urban jungles.*

—Ian Easton, *Why a Taiwan Invasion Would Look Nothing Like D-Day*<sup>7</sup>

Superficially, China should be able to amphibiously invade and smash Taiwan for a forced reunification. Not only is China's economy orders of magnitude larger than Taiwan's, but its military boasts a budget 25 times larger.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, if everything were to go China's way, it would be able to land 300,000 troops with supporting vehicles in 10 days.<sup>9</sup> But that would require everything actually going according to plan—and in reality, Taiwan's extensive preparation and geography make it a potential nightmare for China.

Specifically, Taiwan's military would dwarf any initial invasion force; all militarily useful aspects of their government and private sector are (at least theoretically) integrated into their defense plan, and Taiwan frequently tests its emergency response. Further, the island is a natural fortress where China must capture enough seaports and airports to inflow troops and equipment, all while trying to preserve transportation from attacks by Taiwan—and possibly from the United States and Japan. Taiwan is no easy problem for China.

Estimates vary on how much combat power China could insert into Taiwan on day one of an all-out amphibious attack with supporting air insertions. Shugart estimates that China could amphibiously deliver about 21,000 troops and equipment for one heavy brigade of tanks and mechanized vehicles.<sup>10</sup> Cancian and colleagues estimate capacity in 2026 to be 8,000 troops per day plus some equipment.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the Allies amphibiously landed roughly 131,000 troops and their equipment, plus 24,000 more troops via air, all on the first day of the 1944 Normandy invasion.<sup>12</sup> The upper limits of 8,000 or 21,000 are likely far higher than what China could actually deliver on day one because Taiwan would certainly resist; hence, China needs successful deception to enable successful landings.

Submarines, mines, ground and air fires from Taiwan, as well as potential assistance from America and Japan, will attrit the invasion force. With CSIS estimating a 2026 amphibious invasion force at 96 ships and 305 landing craft, China could absorb limited attrition. With further attrition likely on additional trips, we should expect subsequent amphibious waves to continually shrink. While aviation can rapidly move large troop volumes, it cannot compete with sealift for moving the “mountains of equipment and lakes of fuel” that China would need.<sup>13</sup> Hence, China must secure seaports or else be dependent on shrinking volumes of additional equipment and supplies. But China already understands the peril of securing seaports:

Chinese amphibious forces approaching the island’s ports by sea will face a combination of half-sunken ships sticking out of the surf, anchored, and floating sea mines, railroad stake emplacements, log ramps, concrete wave breakers, Belgian gates, Czech hedgehogs, and something the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) texts call “walnut crackers.” Awaiting amphibious tanks in port zones will be improvised Taiwanese “success mines” (gasoline drums packed with plastic explosives and shrapnel), anti-tank mines, anti-tank ditches, anti-tank walls and tank traps. Awaiting amphibious infantry ashore will be anti-personnel mines, Mexican sisals (fire resistant plants with circular arrangements of spikey, sword-like leaves up to six feet long), webs of barbed wire, iron crash barriers, piles of glass shards embedded in concrete, water-filled trenches, iron spike boards, anti-personnel revetments, and “contamination zones” (which the PLA reportedly fears could be comprised of poison gas or radiological agents). Together, these imagined obstacles are expected to create manmade kill-boxes inside and around ports.<sup>14</sup>

China should expect similar nightmares at beaches and spaces suitable for massed helicopter landings. Following the landings would be terrifying breakouts to seaports and airports against Taiwan’s integrated military and civilian response; see figure 1 for the location of possible invasion beaches and amphibious staging areas and figure 2 for Taiwan’s ports that can accommodate equipment transports. Taiwan’s active military numbers 190,000, with 260,000 reservists; counting inactive reserves, who received military training but are no longer serving, Taiwan’s defense force numbers approximately two million.<sup>15</sup> Further, police, firefighters, construction workers, fishing crews, bus drivers, etc., are part of the defense by law.<sup>16</sup> While Taiwan’s integrated government and private sector response would not be perfect, it would probably be decent since Taiwan conducts counter-invasion drills yearly. Further, it began combining counter-invasion drills with emergency response drills (usually aimed at natural disasters) in 2023 to fully test its integrated response.<sup>17</sup>

Figure 1

## Amphibious Staging and Assault<sup>18</sup>

Left, amphibious staging areas opposite Taiwan. Right, Taiwan's 14 beaches suitable for amphibious assault.

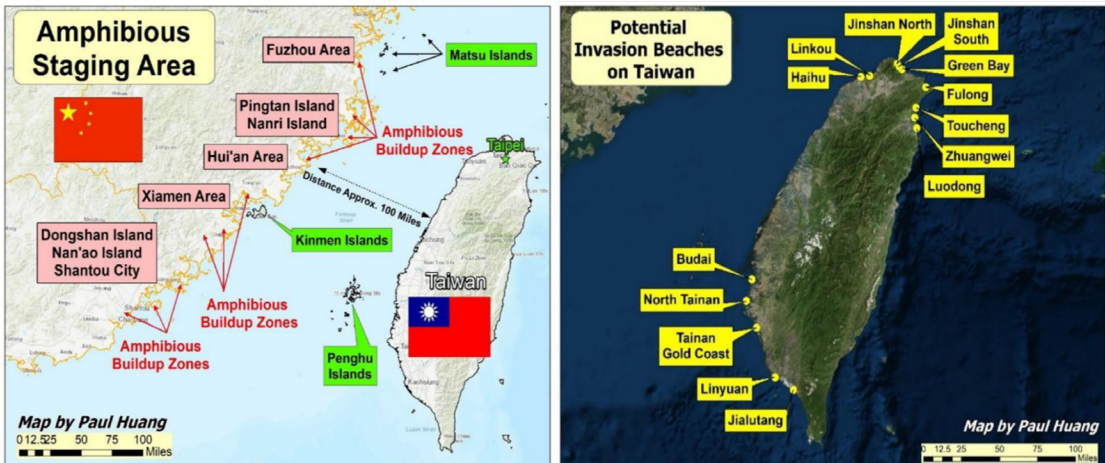
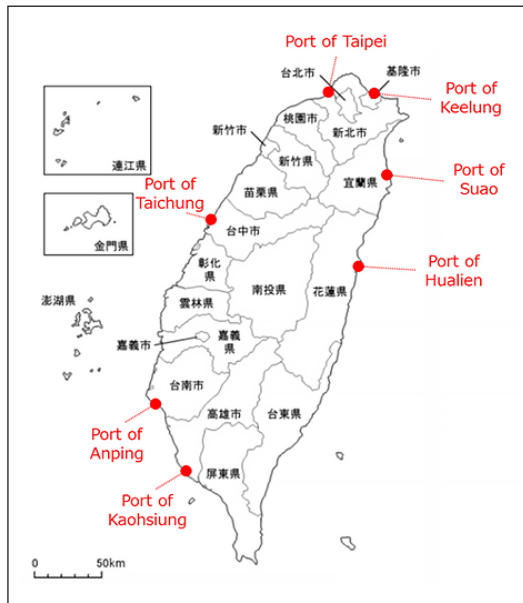


Figure 2

## Taiwan's Largest Container Ports<sup>19</sup>

These ports would be the most useful to China for landing equipment and bulk supplies for an invasion.



Taiwan has advantages; its army would outnumber China's during at least the first days of amphibious landings. It has also had decades to build defensive plans around an integrated, whole-of-government and private-sector response. Consequently, China must secure seaports

to bring in supplies. Yet, despite all of Taiwan's defender advantages, China won the CSIS wargame in which Taiwan fought alone.<sup>20</sup>

## Chapter 2: How Would China Likely Invade?

*The invasion always starts the same way: an opening bombardment destroys most of Taiwan's navy and air force in the first hours of hostilities. Augmented by a powerful rocket force, the Chinese navy encircles Taiwan and interdicts any attempts to get ships and aircraft to the besieged island. Tens of thousands of Chinese soldiers cross the strait in a mix of military amphibious craft and civilian roll-on, roll-off ships, while air assault and airborne troops land behind the beachheads.*

— Mark Cancian, Matthew Cancian and Eric Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War*<sup>21</sup>

Given the problem of invading a natural fortress, defended by a population keenly aware of the threat and which has practiced and prepared for decades, how might China solve the problem of winning an invasion? This chapter will provide an understanding of likely courses of action through an analysis of CSIS's 2023 wargame.<sup>22</sup> Second-guessing that expert-written report is beyond this paper's scope. However, this chapter analyzes how China might solve this immense challenge while highlighting strategic and operational issues that China could deploy deception against. The next chapter will dive into deception theory and doctrine, providing tools to build plausible deception operations.

CSIS ran 24 wargame iterations of an all-out amphibious invasion without prior blockade or overt war-like movements.<sup>23</sup> Every iteration changed variables, such as Japanese intervention, how quickly the United States responds, if the United States does not respond, the availability of critical anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), the effectiveness of Taiwan's ground forces and more. The essence of the invasion includes a visible build-up, followed by long-range fires against Taiwan and possibly other locations. A naval blockade follows to support an amphibious assault with supporting airborne and air-assault insertions aimed at securing beachheads, seaports and airports, if possible. *If China can build up enough combat power, it will attempt to breakout.*<sup>24</sup>

The meaning of winning or losing for China, or for the combined forces of the United States, Taiwan and possibly Japan, comes down to controlling the main island and defeating organized resistance on land. CSIS allowed stalemates because they limited the number of turns; this paper assumes that all stalemates, such as China establishing a foothold but being unable to break-out, are eventually resolved.<sup>25</sup> Lastly, although the loss of life, equipment and infrastructure would be massive, that does not factor into determining which side wins.

The results of the 24 wargames revealed *essential conditions* that the United States and Taiwan require to win; conversely, it also revealed conditions that China requires to win (the *necessary conditions*). Necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for the United States and Taiwan are:

1. Taiwan must vigorously resist. If it does not, the rest is futile.
2. The United States must join hostilities within days and with the full range of its capabilities. Delays and half measures would make the defense harder, increase U.S. casualties and raise the risk of the Chinese creating an irreducible lodgment on Taiwan.

3. The United States must have use of its bases in Japan. Without them, the United States could not use its numerous fighter/attack aircraft.
4. Finally, the United States must possess enough air-launched, long-range ASCMs.<sup>26</sup>

The essential condition to defeat China is preventing it from building superior combat power ashore—and those necessary conditions are all required for this essential condition. With this understanding, how can China attempt to build combat power in Taiwan?

Clearly, China has two means to transport troops and equipment to Taiwan: maritime (e.g., fishing boats, ferries, amphibious craft) and air (e.g., fixed-wing, helicopters). Of the United States and Taiwan's four necessary conditions, two, three and four are aimed at slowing or halting the maritime movement via various strikes against ships, ports and submarines.<sup>27</sup> While air movements would aid China, they would be a supporting effort; while aircraft can rapidly move troops, they cannot move equipment and supplies en masse in the same way that ships can.

Airborne and air assault insertions may initially gain surprise, but their viability would likely plummet as Taiwan would recover from the initial shock. Hence, subsequent air movement will require airports that are 1) controlled by Chinese forces, 2) not destroyed or otherwise blocked and 3) that have safe ingress and egress routes. In CSIS' wargames, Taiwan or America often destroyed or sabotaged airports (and seaports) that the Chinese captured, and CSIS noted that this was highly effective. Fighting to retain airports, damaging or destroying them, or denying airspace prevented China from ever using the airports.<sup>28</sup>

Considering the above, we can forecast a few strategic and operational situations wherein China could use deception to gain an advantage. First, China could use deception to delay American support or to deny American bases in Japan (strategic level). Second, given only 14 suitable beaches and the limited amphibious lift from chapter 1, China could use deception to provide other means for landing equipment on beaches, bypassing Taiwan's seaports (operational level). On the air side, since air insertion will likely become less effective over time, China could use deception to increase the size of early air insertions (operational level). Chapter 4 addresses these issues.

What of China's necessary conditions for winning? CSIS conducted an iteration to determine those conditions under the *Ragnarok* scenario.<sup>29</sup> Since this is a contest of force, China's essential victory conditions are effectively the opposite of those of Taiwan and the United States. However, these conditions will be discussed in chapter 4, where they serve as building blocks for a plausible Chinese deception plan. But first, deception theory and doctrine must be understood.

### **Chapter 3: Deception Theory and Doctrine**

*All warfare is based on deception.*

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*<sup>30</sup>

Deception is powerful: intuitive to understand, but not necessarily easy to execute. While technology and the degree of integration into national military cultures has changed, the concepts have remained because deception is fundamentally a mental game between opponents

(even if one side does not recognize the game).<sup>31</sup> The point of this chapter is to provide a foundation in deception theory and doctrine so that chapter 4 can present and analyze a deception OA that China might employ for an invasion of Taiwan.

While China will employ its deception doctrine for an invasion, the problem is that Chinese deception doctrine is a tightly held secret; this is unsurprising for a nation obsessed with secrecy and narrative control for both internal and external audiences. Hence this chapter will illustrate that U.S. Army deception doctrine and theory aligns very closely with examples of Chinese deception and with what little we know of modern Chinese military deception doctrine.

This chapter will primarily explore U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-13.4, *Army Support to Military Deception*, using it as a tool to illustrate this alignment.<sup>32</sup> FM 3-13.4 is itself an interesting mix of theory and doctrine. Its first chapter includes a collection of best deception thought in the form of maxims, and a framework of types, tactics and techniques drawn from theorists (shown in figure 4). Notably, the famed Chinese theorist and strategist Sun Tzu also presented his deception theory in *The Art of War* using maxims, or self-evident truths.

After reviewing FM 3-13.4's theory and doctrine, we illustrate its alignment by analyzing the 1950 Chinese intervention in the Korean War.<sup>33</sup> This example illustrates a way of thinking about deception that is very similar to Western theory and practice. This chapter ends by discussing what is known of modern Chinese deception doctrine.

### *Categories and Types of Military Deception*

This paper will focus on two categories: *military deception* (MILDEC) and *deception in support of operations security* (DISO). Both terms are defined in FM 3-13.4, but it is hard to differentiate MILDEC and DISO from each other when just looking at the standard definitions. The real difference is that MILDEC wants an enemy decisionmaker to receive information that induces either inaction or a specific action to advantage friendly forces. In contrast, DISO does not try to cause an enemy decision/indecision; rather, it tries to mislead foreign intelligence entities (FIE) from realizing what is actually happening, thereby protecting friendly forces.<sup>34</sup>

There are two types of military deception: ambiguity-increasing deception and ambiguity-decreasing deception (see figure 3). Ambiguity-increasing intends to make the enemy uncertain about what friendly forces are actually doing. Ambiguity-decreasing is the opposite; the intent is to make the enemy certain of friendly actions.<sup>35</sup> Ambiguity-increasing can create paralysis as decisionmakers wait for situations to develop. In contrast, ambiguity-decreasing deception tends to work well on decisive decisionmakers and tries to make them very certain and very wrong.<sup>36</sup> In general, both focus on time, location, method, resource and purpose, trying to cause the enemy decisionmaker to take a specific action or inaction, because the enemy is uncertain, or very certain, of friendly actions.

Figure 3

## U.S. Army Deception Theory and Doctrine<sup>37</sup>

*This cognitive tool shows the intermix of theory and doctrine that the U.S. Army has adopted in its deception thinking.*

Types of Military Deception	Tactics	Techniques
<p>(the state of mind to produce in the enemy, to cause them to take an action or inaction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ambiguity Increasing</li> <li>• Ambiguity Decreasing</li> </ul>	<p>(the broad concept for each action in the deception operation)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstration</li> <li>• Display</li> <li>• Diversion</li> <li>• Feint</li> <li>• Ruse</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="561 620 851 782" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p>Deception tactics are normally considered as actions for military units at the tactical level of war, but the concepts can apply to other levels and to situations other than employing forces</p> </div>	<p>(the way to reveal the information in the deception event)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signature Amplification or Suppression</li> <li>• Conditioning the Enemy</li> <li>• Conditioning the Target by Repetition</li> <li>• Leading the Enemy by Mistake</li> <li>• Leading the Enemy by Substitution</li> <li>• Overloading the Enemy Sensors</li> <li>• Reinforcing the Impression</li> <li>• Repackaging Known Signatures</li> </ul>
Deception Maxims		
<p>(characteristics to follow in planning and execution)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Care of Possible Unwanted Reactions</li> <li>• Care in the Design of Planned Placement of Deceptive Material</li> <li>• Husbanding of Deception Assets</li> <li>• Importance of Feedback</li> <li>• Jones' Dilemma</li> <li>• Leverage the Truth</li> <li>• Limitations to Human Information Processing</li> <li>• Magruder's Principle</li> <li>• Minimize Falsehood</li> <li>• Multiple Forms of Surprise</li> <li>• Sequencing Rule</li> </ul>		

FM 3-13.4 has definitions and descriptions of the tactics, techniques and maxims for military deception, as listed in Figure 3. To illustrate that U.S. Army doctrine applies across time and culture, we will analyze Chinese deception during their 1950 Korean War intervention.

### *Example (DISO into MILDEC): Chinese Intervention in the Korean War*

China's 1950 intervention in the Korean War, on behalf of North Korea, is an excellent example of DISO enabling later MILDEC for a surprise attack. It also illustrates the application of operational art to deception, particularly the elements of phasing and transitions through the seamless shift from DISO to MILDEC. This example is important because China will most certainly want to conceal at least some elements of its invasion preparations through DISO, leading to a smooth transition to MILDEC in support of the kinetic portion of the invasion. We will describe the situation and events, and then analyze them using U.S. Army deception doctrine.

Chinese forces began entering North Korea on roughly 12 October 1950; approximately 300,000 troops had crossed by 13 November.<sup>38</sup> Naturally, it is impossible to entirely conceal such a force; by 15 October, intelligence entities began reporting Chinese movements in North Korea.<sup>39</sup> However, all reports came from human sources, such as civilians and captured Chinese and North Korean troops, and aerial reconnaissance could not confirm movement.<sup>40</sup> Moving long distances, entirely at night, and hiding under camouflage during the day, was the perfect way to avoid aerial recon.<sup>41</sup> Without direct, undisputable confirmation by technology, friendly intel failed to make sense of the reports.

Another reason it could not make sense of them was because of the deliberate repackaging of units. Specifically, China deliberately reorganized and redesignated units as smaller formations before they crossed the border: they became “volunteer forces,” not PLA units. Since prisoners of war were inevitable, this DISO measure supported China’s flimsy narrative of not being directly involved in the conflict, while simultaneously confusing FIE. This initial uncertainty resulted in underestimating Chinese forces “by a factor of three.”<sup>42</sup>

The Chinese had one more important component to their deception plan before becoming decisively engaged with American forces, and that was deliberately targeting Republic of Korea (ROK, aka South Korea) forces while avoiding American forces. On 24 October, when roughly 120,000 troops had entered Korea, but most were still marshalling in Manchuria, the Chinese attacked the ROK II Corps.<sup>43</sup> By 26 October, they had destroyed the 6th ROK Division and were closing in on the destruction of the entire II ROK Corps.<sup>44</sup> Together, these three DISO measures—night movement, repackaging units to confuse FIE and attacking ROK units while avoiding American units—were massively successful. See table 1 for a summary of the deception and how it fits into U.S. Army deception doctrine.

Ultimately, the three measures were overwhelmingly effective because of Magruder’s Principle (see FM 3-13.4): General MacArthur and his intelligence section already believed that China would not conduct a meaningful intervention. In a meeting with President Truman on 15 October, General MacArthur stated his intelligence was aware of 300,000 Chinese troops in Manchuria (which borders Korea), but he believed only 50,000–60,000 would be able to cross, and he was “no longer fearful of their intervention.”<sup>45</sup> This pattern of underestimating Chinese forces continued. On 18 November, American intelligence estimated Chinese forces in Korea at only 34,000; there were really 300,000.<sup>46</sup>

Table 1

## Analysis of China's Deception During the Korean War<sup>47</sup>

Deception Plan	Employment
Goal	Conceal size and activity of massing forces (DISO)
Objective	Cause enemy to misinterpret and not react
Target	FIE and General McArthur
Perceptions	All Chinese forces are small groups of volunteers and no threat to the UN offensive

U.S. Army deception doctrine concept	Chinese employment in this example	Explanation
Ambiguity	Decreasing	Chinese forces could not stop the UN offensive.
Tactics	N/A	While this DISO operation has elements of a ruse because it involved trickery, it did not involve overt actions like a demonstration, and in general it sought to avoid conflict to buy time.
Techniques	Signature suppression	Night movements and daytime concealment were clear signature suppression techniques.
	Repackaging known organizational or capability signatures	Intentionally renumbering units, naming them as volunteer units and designating them as smaller echelon units, all repackaged them into what would appear to be smaller units, helping to create the perception of small groups of volunteers.
Maxims	Magruder's Principle	UN forces were clearly winning prior to the Chinese intervention. Reaching the Yalu River by Thanksgiving was in sight. Chinese forces supported that assumption until they achieved mass.
	Jones' Dilemma	By moving at night and hiding in the day, the only conduit for FIE was human reporting, which could not be corroborated through other means.
	Limitations to human information processing	All sample sizes were small: only four Chinese prisoners were captured by 27 October, which was after the 6th ROK Division had been destroyed, but before decisive engagement of American forces. American intelligence <sup>48</sup> fell victim to the law of small numbers and believed there were too few prisoners to indicate a substantial force.

One of the most important aspects of this deception operation is how seamlessly it morphed from DISO to MILDEC. While we do not have official Chinese records to understand their deception plan, we can make reasonable inferences based on outcomes. The transition to MILDEC remained an ambiguity-decreasing operation, with a goal of gaining an advantage by convincing UN units to continue separating, increasing their vulnerability as they advanced up the widening Korean Peninsula. The use of techniques and maxims remained unchanged, save for two additions. The Chinese added Jones' Dilemma (see FM 3-13.4) by initially attacking Korean units and avoiding American units, reducing the conduits through which the truth could flow to American intelligence and decisionmakers. Similarly, with no Chinese attacks on American units by 27 October, American decisionmakers had a sample size of zero and fell victim to limitations of human information processing (defined in FM 3-13.4).

The single most important lesson from this example is the value of following Magruder's Principle. Many American military officers were very familiar with China and its military from World War II. In particular, two important general officers in Korea had led a mission in China from 1942–1945 to “organize, train, equip, and advise in combat thirty-nine Nationalist Chinese divisions.”<sup>49</sup> Further, the American presence in China continued until 1949, and senior American officers had extensive contact with Chinese communist leaders through World War II.<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, American leaders should have known the Chinese better.

In the end, the Chinese helped General MacArthur deceive himself. They correctly played to his beliefs and reinforced his perceptions even as they transitioned from the initial surprise to their main attack. For General McArthur, momentum was on his side; he had just conducted another successful amphibious operation, the kind at which he was an expert. Additionally, the Chinese were not only severely weakened from two decades of civil war that had ended only a year before, but should have been inferior to the American-led force. What this example reveals is that deception campaigns can start with Magruder's Principle as their foundation if one understands their target.

### *Are Modern Chinese Deception Theory and Doctrine Drastically Different?*

As mentioned above, Chinese military deception doctrine is a tightly held secret. However, the two examples we have reveal close alignment with U.S. Army thinking. Michael Pillsbury analyzed two doctrinal-style publications, dated about 1999, that came from influential figures in China's military education system. He found strong belief in the power of deception to provide advantage, a preference for low-tech deception, partiality to ambiguity-decreasing operations that can cause an enemy to commit a fatal flaw, and an appreciation for tailoring the deception to the specific targeted individual. The only real difference is that, in Chinese deception, doctrine expects commanders to personally create deception plans, rather than deception staff officers in the American military.<sup>51</sup>

Although many have claimed that there is a distinct Chinese way of war, the evidence strongly shows there is not. Rich Cheriscla demonstrates that “Sun Tzu and Mao's teachings do not embody the theoretical underpinnings of a unique Chinese way of war, but rather demonstrate widely held general principles—as evidenced by the Western application of many of Sun Tzu's precepts, and the European influence present in Mao's writing.”<sup>52</sup> Patrick Porter came to a similar conclusion, noting that where superficial observation might suggest different Western and Eastern ways of war, “the hypothesis of culturally determined ‘ways of war’ ignores too many awkward contrary cases that cut across its neat frontiers.”<sup>53</sup> Like Cheriscla, Porter demonstrates that all cultures fit the needs of the time and that they use asymmetric approaches when required.

To summarize, 1) the Chinese senior commander is personally vital to deception planning and 2) senior commanders are students of Sun Tzu and Mao who ardently espoused deception but 3) there is no distinct “Chinese way of war” and 4) the history, theory and doctrine of Chinese deception aligns with current U.S. Army deception theory and doctrine because deception is fundamentally an intellectual competition between opponents. This means Chinese deception in support of an amphibious invasion of Taiwan can be anticipated. Knowing this, perhaps the deceived can become the deceiver.

## Chapter 4: Deception for History's Most Difficult Invasion

*Designing around the victim's strategy is most devastating when the weaknesses to be exploited are ones not fully recognized by the victim. . . . Most decisive are operational innovations that accomplish what the victim's leaders consider impossible.*

—Richard K. Betts, “Surprise Despite Warning”<sup>54</sup>

This chapter explores an OA for China to achieve its essential condition and develops a broad supporting deception plan. As mentioned in chapter 2, CSIS' special “Ragnarok” scenario specifically explored the necessary conditions for China to win, which effectively reduces to negating “U.S. airpower, both fighter attack and bombers.”<sup>55</sup> This could happen by 1) delaying America's response, 2) destroying its airpower (preferably on the ground) or 3) keeping essential fighter aircraft outside of effective range by denying basing in Japan.

Airpower is necessary because “without U.S. airpower, Taiwanese ground-launched ASCMs and U.S. SSNs [nuclear submarines] are insufficient to defeat a Chinese invasion; furthermore, the vulnerability of surface ships prevents the U.S. surface fleet from being effective.”<sup>56</sup> In light of this, China's necessary conditions 1) and 2) are self-evident. However, 3) would also be effective since, without the relatively close access of Japan, the U.S. would lack the ability to generate enough air sorties to sufficiently attrit the Chinese maritime transportation.<sup>57</sup> These necessary conditions support the essential condition (unstated by CSIS) of enabling China to apply superior combat power for the ground campaign in Taiwan.

Tables 2, 3 and 4 depict plausible operational approaches with supporting deception that China could employ in an invasion to achieve the necessary conditions for a decisive condition. The invasion phase (Phase 3) includes novel massed airdrops from commercial aircraft and deliberately grounding roll-on/roll-off (ROLO) ferries and similar boats to provide heavy vehicles and equipment more rapidly. These novel ideas address some of the questions posed at the end of chapter 2 about how deception might enable China to put more troops and equipment ashore via air/sealift.

This OA tries to draw in American air and naval forces early for a decisive battle. It has the potential to achieve situational and fundamental surprise, but the outcome of that depends on the other side. Further, the deception events can be understood through the signal and noise paradigm of mixing truth and lies. While many other approaches and deception plans are possible, space considerations necessitate that these be left for future research.

Table 2

## Phase 1: Build-Up<sup>58</sup>

Major Actions/Approach	Deception Concept	Potential Decision Points (DP)
<p><b>Phase 1: Build-Up</b></p> <p>This excursion explores how China can use deception to its advantage if the United States commits to defending Taiwan before conflict occurs. It assumes the United States has basing access in Japan, and China will strike Japan too, for fear it will not remain neutral if China attacks American forces on Japan.</p> <p>In this OA, China rapidly builds-up, trains and prepares an invasion force to draw American forces in for a decisive battle.</p>	<p><b>Category:</b> DISO</p> <p><b>Target:</b> FIE</p> <p><b>Goal:</b> Gain surprise</p> <p><b>Objective:</b> (strategic and operational) Cause FIE to misperceive the threat and misjudge the timing of an attack.</p> <p><b>Perception:</b> A Chinese invasion is credible but can be averted, and China is not yet ready to invade.</p> <p><b>Ambiguity:</b> Decreasing to increasing</p>	None
Tactics	Techniques	Maxims
Demonstrations (strategic)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin with exercises that mimic rehearsals for an amphibious invasion. Includes air/maritime incursions across the median line.</li> <li>• If Taiwan attacks China as the exercises increasingly infringe on Taiwan, China can use that crisis event in three ways:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) try to reset diplomacy with Taiwan and the United States to get them to lower their guard for a later attack;</li> <li>2) provide justification for China's later invasion while creating conflicting sentiment in Taiwan, the United States and Japan;</li> <li>3) if China shows restraint and does not respond militarily, Taiwan will be incentivized to avoid further attacks on China for fear that it would soon exhaust China's patience. For China, this would be a false version of escalating to deescalate.</li> </ol> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signature amplification             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Convince the United States to commit more forces to Japan and/or Guam in response to the crisis, enabling China's planned decisive battle.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Reinforcing the impression             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Condition the Taiwanese to accept larger and larger forces that increasingly resemble invasion forces as they cross the median line and get closer to Taiwan.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magruder's Principle             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Despite all prior crises, China has not attempted to invade Taiwan. If Taiwan, Japan and the United States escalate militarily, they can then deescalate and go back to precrisis relations and use the crisis as a way for greater dialogue to avoid further crises.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The importance of feedback             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- China will be able to see if Taiwan, the United States and Japan are responding as intended or not to the exercises.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Beware of unwanted reactions             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If China's false version of escalate to deescalate does not work, and crisis remains, China will likely lose fundamental surprise with their initial attack. However, they can maintain situational surprise.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Diversions (strategic)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distract world attention away from Taiwan             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attempt to diplomatically resolve other lingering issues to raise ambiguity over an invasion of Taiwan. For instance, attempts to settle border disputes with India.</li> <li>- Create ambiguity in the minds of American FIE and U.S. president (POTUS) through seemingly genuine diplomatic overtures while continuing exercises against Taiwan.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signature amplification</li> <li>• Reinforcing the impression             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The perception should be that China seeks genuine rapprochement, with military escalation as the means to enable the dialogue, when the invasion is the hidden real end state.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magruder's Principle             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Taiwan and the United States believe an invasion is possible, but not imminent or inevitable. Competition and crisis in other areas play to that.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Leverage the truth             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- China has simmering tensions with neighbors, including border wars with both India and Vietnam.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Table 3

Phase 2: Fires and Effects<sup>59</sup>

Major Actions/Approach	Deception Concept	Potential DP
<p><b>Phase 2: Fires and Effects</b></p> <p>Missile strikes and other effects on Taiwan and American and Japanese forces in Japan. China will try to rapidly defeat American and Japanese airpower so that China can conduct the follow-on invasion in Phase 3. China will avoid attacking Guam if America ends its involvement following decisive Chinese strikes in Japan. Not attacking Guam (American territory) offers the United States a diplomatic off-ramp. However, continued American involvement is presented as a decision point.</p> <p>This OA assumes that Japan will not continue conflict without the United States, but the United States may continue without Japan.</p>	<p><b>Category:</b> MILDEC</p> <p><b>Target:</b> POTUS and Prime Minister of Japan (PMJ)</p> <p><b>Goal:</b> Gain time for an irreducible foothold in Taiwan with sea lines of communication with China.</p> <p><b>Objective:</b> (strategic) Cause the United States and Japan to quit the conflict or be so diminished they cannot respond effectively; (operational) cause Taiwan to form a wrong initial assessment of how and where the ground component main effort will occur.</p> <p><b>Perception:</b> (strategic) China cannot be stopped as their victory is inevitable or too costly to stop; (operational) China has a clear main effort for the landing.</p> <p><b>Ambiguity:</b> Decreasing</p>	<p>(Chinese leadership will enact the decision or not based on the exact situation at the time.)</p> <p><b>DP 1:</b> The United States does not quit the conflict after decisive strikes on Japan.</p> <p><b>Decision</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1A: If the United States does not quit, attack Guam with mass missile strikes and other effects.</li> <li>1B: If Japan does not quit, expand attacks to key dual-use, civil-military transportation infrastructure and industries. In particular, attack ports, fuel storage and ship building. The intent would be to raise the cost to Japan while diminishing its basing capability and long-term ability to regenerate combat power.</li> </ul>
Tactics	Techniques	Maxims
Diversions (strategic)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attempt to delay U.S./Japanese response and provide off-ramp through diplomatic messaging, including back-channel.</li> <li>Confuse American, Japanese and Taiwanese public through TikTok/ other media, all to buy time and create disjointed responses.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Signature amplification                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- TikTok</li> </ul> </li> <li>Reinforcing the impression                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Direct messaging to the public, open diplomacy efforts and back-channel will combine to complicate and hence create responses that are too slow or not decisive.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Importance of feedback                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Democracies will not be able to avoid public discourse and leaders will feel compelled to issue clear statements of intent to gain domestic consensus.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Display (strategic)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deliberately create the impression of retaining enough missiles to devastate Guam and additional targets in Japan (Decision 1A, 1B). The United States and Japan likely already have estimates, by missile class, to make this assessment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deception not necessarily required since this component is more traditional messaging.</li> <li>If China does not have enough real missiles for a deterrent, then amplify signature or leading by substitution with dummy/decoy missiles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limitations to human information processing                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- American and Japanese analysts may be overwhelmed in assessing remaining missile stocks. China will want to project a large remaining stock, whether accurate or not.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Feint (operational)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Draw Taiwanese forces and attention to the wrong part of the island through the direction and size of the initial naval and amphibious force (this feint will be timed near simultaneously with missile strikes, but actual landing is phase 3).</li> <li>The force conducting the feint should be a supporting effort with enough size to be mistaken for the real main effort.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Signature amplification</li> <li>Reinforcing the impression/conditioning                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- China aims its feint at locations that it has previously been more oriented on in prior incursions across the median line.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Magruder's Principle                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If China has conditioned Taiwan to expect an attack on a certain area of the island, the feint will play to this.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Leverage the truth                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Include essential capabilities in the feint to make it appear to be the main effort, including a large amphibious element with fuel tankers and lift for armored formations.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Jones' Dilemma                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Deliberately blind many of Taiwan's information collection means, but leave them the capability of observing the feint.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Table 4

## Phase 3: Invasion<sup>60</sup>

Major Actions/Approach	Deception Concept	Potential DP
<p><b>Phase 3:</b> Invasion</p> <p>Full-scale invasion of Taiwan via sea and air</p> <p>The intent is still to keep the United States and Japan out of the conflict, if possible. If the United States responds, then China needs to play for time. China should avoid drawing in Japan, which can respond faster than the United States, due to its proximity, making an attack on Guam attractive to China.</p> <p>The landing on Taiwan will initially be costly and perilous. China must create a foothold that it can use to secure a port. China can use deception to attack in unexpected ways, and will likely use its most unexpected techniques in this decisive phase.</p>	<p><b>Category:</b> MILDEC</p> <p><b>Target:</b> POTUS and PMJ</p> <p><b>Goal:</b> Build an irreducible foothold in Taiwan with sea lines of communication with China.</p> <p><b>Objective:</b> (strategic) Prevent the United States and Japan from responding decisively; (operational) cause Taiwan to commit its initially overwhelming combat power to the wrong place, at the wrong time.</p> <p><b>Perception:</b> (strategic) No change from Phase 2; (operational) no change from Phase 2.</p> <p><b>Ambiguity:</b> Decreasing</p>	<p>(Chinese leadership will enact the decision or not based on the exact situation at the time.)</p> <p><b>DP 1:</b> The United States does not quit the conflict after decisive strikes on Japan. No change; restated since DP 1 may occur in this phase or in Phase 2.</p> <p><b>Decision</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No change from Phase 2</li> </ul>
Tactics	Techniques	Maxims
<b>Diversions (strategic)</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No change from Phase 2</li> <li>• Decision 4A and 4B (above) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If the United States and Japan have not exited the conflict, use small kamikaze drones launched by saboteurs to attrit military aircraft while they are vulnerable on the ground. This tactic can try to buy time and create a dilemma of balancing the risk from missile attacks on massed airpower versus attrition on dispersed assets. In addition to buying time, it could also induce decision paralysis.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signature amplification <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No change from Phase 2</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Reinforcing the impression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No change from Phase 2</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Reinforcing the impression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No change from Phase 2</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Importance of feedback <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No change from Phase 2</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Husbanding of deception assets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- While China could potentially attrit airpower on the ground in Guam or Okinawa with drones, it would be better to save that for mainland Japan, where saboteurs have move and escape options, preserving this tactic until it can enable a decisive dilemma.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Display (strategic)</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If Decisions 1A and 1B are reached, then China should create the appearance that its missile stockpiles are still healthy to continue to try to coerce the United States and Japan to exit the conflict. This will also maintain the dilemma created by dual drone and missile threats.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signature amplification and reduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Amplify the signature of full silos/ launchers and hide the signature of low stockage.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beware of possible unwanted actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If China deliberately exposes real or false missile stockages and platforms to compel the United States and Japan to withdraw from the conflict, they will be exposing strikable targets, which is an unwanted action.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Feint and Ruse (operational)</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Feint) If the initial feint draws away defenders to the wrong part of the island, employ the following ruses:</li> <li>• Isolate Taiwanese drawn to the feint with a Chinese massed air drop.</li> <li>• Sacrifice ROLO ferries (after mine clearing) via beach grounding to enable real main effort.</li> <li>• Use container and similar ships with large flat tops as mobile helicopter pickup zones.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforcing the impression, conditioning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Taiwan will expect the air insertion to be small relative to the sea lift, and the initial feint will reinforce this.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Overloading sensors and repackaging known capabilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use vast fleets of commercial aircraft for air insert and use hundreds of container ships and others at sea.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Signature reduction, reinforcing and repackaging <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Visual modification to protect mine sweepers; ferries and container ships are likely to be interpreted as second wave forces designed for ports; unconventional use of ferries and container ships will repackage their capabilities.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magruder's Principle <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feint toward areas in which Taiwan already expects the main attack.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Leverage the truth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No change from Phase 2</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Jones' Dilemma <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No change from Phase 2</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Multiple forms of surprise, husbanding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The combined means with ferries, container ships, mine sweepers and commercial aircraft includes numerous unprecedented ruses.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Phase 3 of both OAs has three novel ruses to highlight (see figure 4): airdropping troops via commercial aircraft, grounding ROLO ferries when docks are unavailable, and using container ships and similar ships with wide flattops as mobile helicopter staging points. From my research, only the container ship option has been tried, and not in the way described below (see figure 5). These ruses would enable China to overcome the dilemma of massing combat power faster than Taiwan can respond while Taiwan retains the ports.

Figure 4

### This Paper's Three Novel Deception Ruses<sup>61</sup>



Massed air drops of troops via commercial aircraft could be paradigm changing. In 2020, China had approximately 6,800 civilian cargo and passenger aircraft, a number that has been growing annually.<sup>62</sup> For rough order-of-magnitude calculations, if China uses all of those aircraft, with an average of 200 jumpers per aircraft, then 1,360,000 troops could be airdropped on Taiwan in just the first pass. Now this number is certainly high since not all aircraft would be available, many aircraft would likely be shot down, some may collide in the congestion, and not all jumpers would survive the jump and landing. But the point is China could mostly fail in this operation and still drastically increase its combat power ashore. Repeating this over multiple iterations, and increasing survivability through jamming and electronic dazzling, suppressing or destroying air defenses and intercepting fighters, China could massively alter the force ratios from day one.

Figure 5

### Chinese Commercial Ship Participating in Landing Drills<sup>63</sup>



Using container ships, barges and similar flattop boats as mobile helicopter pickup zones presents similar opportunities. Since the concept is not entirely novel (see figure 5), China could try to conceal this ruse by loading actual containers before landing helicopters. The containers would make the ships appear part of later waves, not initial assault forces, and confuse FIE and decisionmakers. While this option would lack the volume of massed drops from commercial aircraft, helicopters provide the opportunity to place troops where you want them, immediately ready to fight. In contrast, air drops are infamous for scattering troops, requiring precious time for consolidation, and they often result in ad-hoc units.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, helicopters can make up for their smaller volume with faster passes: in minutes, a helicopter can land on Taiwan and then return to the ship for more troops. As a rough calculation, the PLA Air Force, Navy and Army (PLAAF, PLAN and PLAA, respectively) transport helicopters can deliver about 10,000 troops in one simultaneous lift.<sup>65</sup> Again, this does not incorporate losses or delays, but could quickly change localized force ratios.

Last is the intentional grounding of at least some ROLO ferries on beaches to overcome the initial lack of controlled ports. This ruse would help get ashore the materiel portion of combat power needed for its essential condition. Without controlling a port, China could find itself in a catch-22: needing armor and heavy weapons to seize a port, but being unable to bring that equipment ashore without a port. Every port destroyed to prevent the Chinese seizure would exacerbate this, and this ruse could break that dilemma. This is a novel idea; all discussions of ROLO ferries and similar in the research for this paper involved using them in secured ports, not beaching and sacrificing a portion of the fleet.

Even if these three ruses appear so unconventional as to defy credulity, they can all achieve China's essential condition by fundamentally surprising Taiwan. But their novelty is their value since, if they were routine, they would not create a fundamental surprise. Each ruse has its own problems to solve to be viable, such as how to unload a listing beached ferry (or fix the list), but all of these issues are solvable. Additionally, they are all incredibly risky and would likely result in a tremendous loss of commercial aircraft, commercial boats and troops. But if China is determined to win, these options would reduce its risk by increasing its ashore combat power, increasing its chance of winning the invasion. Further, losses become much less important if you can control the narrative.

China controls the narrative to its people through its state-run media, firewalls to the outside world and online moderators, enabling it to massively underreport losses. In fact, China likely did just that as recently as January 2023, underreporting Covid deaths by a factor of more than 23 by not reporting the death of roughly 1.4 million people in just two months.<sup>66</sup> China will not half-heartedly commit to an invasion, making risky moves such as massed commercial air drops more attractive. Ultimately, if China can solve how to effectively employ these ruses and control reporting on losses, it can fundamentally change the combat power calculus.

## Indicators

*Deception in China is not only accepted, it is expected.*

—Eric C. Anderson and Jeffrey G. Engstrom,  
*China's Use of Perception Management and Strategic Deception*<sup>67</sup>

Detecting deception is intended to be difficult, but falling for and discovering deception relies on *indicators*: “An indicator is data derived from friendly detectable actions and open-source information that an adversary can interpret and piece together to reach conclusions or estimates of friendly intentions, capabilities, or activities.”<sup>68</sup> The objective of deception is to present indicators that cause the opponent to mistake false for real. Note that not every indicator needs to be changed, just enough to hopefully mislead: mixing lies with truth, mixing the signal with the noise.

An indicator of the truth is a *competing observable*, formally defined as “any observable that contradicts the deception story, casts doubt on, or diminishes the impact of one or more required or supporting observables.”<sup>69</sup> The deceiver needs to anticipate and mitigate competing observables to prevent the enemy from discovering the deception.<sup>70</sup> From the perspective of the United States, competing observables would indicate that China is attempting a deception, and should be actively searched for to avoid deception. For simplicity, I use the term “indicator.” The context clarifies if it is a competing observable. But what are the indicators and how do we find them?

First, recognizing that China will almost certainly use deception, we must guard against spiraling into paralysis for constant fear of falling for a trap. For instance, China may conduct feints, demonstrations and similar activities to draw Taiwanese attention to amphibious landing sites that are either false or not the main effort. But if we fail to closely monitor an effort for fear it is a deception, China could exploit the opportunity and turn a feint into a real attack. Failing to react for fear of a trick could turn situational surprise into fundamental surprise. Second, we must include indicators that would far predate an invasion and apply to any OA. In particular, macro-level indicators would appear as China prepares itself to be more resilient to economic sanctions. John Culver identifies several near-term indicators, including “imposition of stronger cross-border capital controls, a freeze on foreign financial assets within China, and rapid liquidation and repatriation of Chinese assets held abroad. It would also include a surge in stockpiling emergency supplies, such as medicine or key technology inputs; a suspension of key exports, such as critical minerals, refined petroleum products, or food; measure to reduce demand or ration key goods, especially imports such as oil and gas; and prioritization or direction of key inputs for military production. Chinese elites and high-priority workers would also face international travel restrictions.”<sup>71</sup>

Other indicators include massive personnel and equipment movements, staging and loading in ports, increasing munitions production and dispersing high pay-off targets; all of these should occur before and during Phase 1.<sup>72</sup> However, force buildups are almost impossible to conceal, which is why China would likely use DISO to fit them into the narrative of other events.<sup>73</sup> For instance, natural disaster exercises, changes within the Belt and Road Initiative, economic restructuring to combat sluggish economic growth, or producing weapons and munitions for export are all convenient narratives to hide different elements of invasion preparation. But if China does not attempt to hide its preparation, it could be preparing to draw in American forces for a decisive battle. While other indicators are possible, this is the best indicator for Phase 1 and can help distinguish potential OAs.

Missile stockages and the combination of direction, quantity and type of boats are the best indicators for Phase 2. If the number of fired surface attack missiles is substantially less than estimated stockages, then China is likely to try either deterring the United States and Japan

or lulling them into a trap. Conversely, if the number fired is an extremely high percentage of estimated stockage, then visible missiles on launchers and in depots may be a bluff to delay or deter. For boats, since feints and demonstrations are relatively easy, we should anticipate them while understanding that they can later transition into a real main or supporting attack. However, the position of ROLO ferries and container ships can alert us to their potential irregular use in Phase 3.

Positioning the ROLOs and container ships in the first sealift wave would align with this paper's ideas for their unconventional use; this would be analogous for unusual quantities of commercial aircraft. Since ferries and similar crafts are not designed for amphibious assault, positioning them with the amphibious assets could indicate unconventional use, such as intentionally grounding them. Similarly, exposing container ships to submarines and fires before ports are partially controlled would align with unconventional use, such as mobile helicopter pickup zones. Likewise, commercial aircraft should not even take off before airports are secured, meaning the appearance of them during the beginning of the amphibious landings, especially massed aircraft, is far from expected and would likely be part of a deception.

## **Conclusion**

A Chinese amphibious invasion of Taiwan would be the most complex military operation since D-Day in 1944. Taiwan has had decades to prepare the island, whose geography overwhelmingly favors the defender, into an absolute fortress, armed with American weapons and defended by a regularly practiced whole-of-society approach. Further, there is a very good chance that the United States and Japan would intervene to aid Taiwan. The odds against China, who has not fought a war since it lost to Vietnam in 1979, could not be higher; the likelihood of Chinese failure is high.<sup>74</sup> China needs to employ deception at the strategic and operational levels if it wants to win.

Yet, despite China requiring deception, CSIS did not incorporate any deception into its wargames. However, their experiments with different conditions across iterations revealed China's three necessary conditions to win: delaying American response, destroying America's in-theater airpower, denying America basing in Japan, or their combinations. Achieving one or more of those necessary conditions enabled China to achieve its essential condition (unstated by CSIS) of achieving superior combat power for ground warfare in Taiwan. This paper explored an OA for how China could use deception to achieve at least one necessary condition and its essential condition. But to do that, it first demonstrated Western theory and U.S. Army doctrine for deception, aligned with historical Chinese deception examples, making them plausible tools to anticipate future Chinese deception.

Chapter 3 used the example of China's Korean War intervention to argue that Chinese deception is not overly different from American thinking. Indeed, that example revealed the sequenced application of DISO followed by MILDEC. One of the interesting characteristics of that example is what appears to be a Chinese preference for ambiguity decreasing operations. This preference makes intuitive sense because causing the enemy to be very certain and very wrong could be decisive. Achieving this would cause the enemy to make fatal mistakes that limit choices to only dilemmas (the essence of a stratagem); our OA replicated this approach. Last, the only noteworthy difference that we know of between American and Chinese deception comes from the translated 1999 documents that reveal that deception planning in China

comes from the commander, rather than from specially trained planners as it does in the United States.

Our example OA is a stratagem that continually presents dilemmas to achieve a decisive battle. It could see Taiwan baited into attacking China through continual escalation; such a situation could be a deceptive version of “escalate to de-escalate.” Creating a crisis, followed by false de-escalation, would be a trap to lure American forces into the theater, then lull them into decreased protection for a surprise missile attack on grounded aircraft (decisive battle). This would achieve the necessary condition of defeating American and Japanese airpower while denying basing in Japan. With Japan no longer a viable base through missile strikes, deception and asymmetric attacks, America would be reduced to two options. It could leave the conflict, or it could operate out of Guam, which would increase vulnerability through massing remaining assets. This OA is a stratagem that continually presents dilemmas. Operationally, China would attempt to deceive Taiwan through feints and demonstrations. It would also hide its true intentions of achieving its essential condition via massed commercial airdrops, grounding some ROLO ferries, and using container ships as mobile helicopter pickup zones.

A Chinese invasion of Taiwan is possible, but not necessarily inevitable. Many analysts believe that if an invasion occurs, it will happen in the next decade. For instance, the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* argued, “If President Xi [China’s president] continues to pursue annexation of Taiwan, the PLA will be prepared by 2027, and he will likely take steps to realize these ambitions by 2030 as China’s population ages, while pursuing unification to solidify his historic legacy in his lifetime.”

The United States, Taiwan and Japan can defeat Chinese deception because of two main advantages. First, we can anticipate China’s moves while looking for relevant indicators (competing observables). We can anticipate this deception through research such as this paper or the CSIS wargames. Second, China’s deception should be recognizable because China’s classic and modern deception history, theory and doctrine are very similar to U.S. Army concepts. We have the advantage. We just need to realize it by understanding, predicting and identifying deception—outthinking Chinese deception to find the signal in the noise. Once we have that advantage, we can defeat their deception by reversing roles so that, if China invades Taiwan, it will be China that experiences both situational and fundamental surprise.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kevin McCauley, “People’s Liberation Army: Army Campaign Doctrine in Transition,” FMSO’s Foreign Perspectives Brief (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Foreign Military Studies Office, 2023), 27–31, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/430269/download>; Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian and Eric Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan>.
- <sup>2</sup> Testimony of Mark Cozad, *Factors Shaping China’s Use of Force Calculations Against Taiwan*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, RAND Corporation, 18 February 2021, 13, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CTA1100/CTA1195-1/RAND\\_CTA1195-1.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CTA1100/CTA1195-1/RAND_CTA1195-1.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> Zvi Lanir, “Fundamental Surprises,” unpublished manuscript (London: Institute of Strategic Risk Management, 1984), [https://www.theismr.org/documents/Lanir%20\(1984\)%20Fundamental%20Surprises.pdf](https://www.theismr.org/documents/Lanir%20(1984)%20Fundamental%20Surprises.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> Lanir, “Fundamental Surprises,” 12.
- <sup>5</sup> Lanir, “Fundamental Surprises,” 25–26.
- <sup>6</sup> For examples of years-long deception and other long-term information operations, see Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2016).
- <sup>7</sup> Ian Easton, “Why a Taiwan Invasion Would Look Nothing Like D-Day,” *Diplomat*, 26 May 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/why-a-taiwan-invasion-would-look-nothing-like-d-day/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Alastair Gale, “U.S. Concerns About China Put Focus on Taiwan’s Defensive Weakness,” *Wall Street Journal*, 22 April 2021, [https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-concerns-about-taiwan-put-focus-on-islands-defensive-weakness-11619113253?mod=article\\_inline](https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-concerns-about-taiwan-put-focus-on-islands-defensive-weakness-11619113253?mod=article_inline).
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas Shugart, “Mind the Gap, Part 2: The Cross-Strait Potential of China’s Civilian Shipping Has Grown,” *War on the Rocks*, 12 October 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/10/mind-the-gap-part-2-the-cross-strait-potential-of-chinas-civilian-shipping-has-grown/>.
- <sup>10</sup> Shugart, “Mind the Gap.”
- <sup>11</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 109.
- <sup>12</sup> Easton, “Nothing Like D-Day.”
- <sup>13</sup> Easton, “Nothing Like D-Day.”
- <sup>14</sup> Ian Easton, *Hostile Harbors: Taiwan’s Ports and PLA Invasion Plans* (Arlington, VA: Project 2049 Institute, 2021), 10.
- <sup>15</sup> Easton, *Hostile Harbors*, 4.
- <sup>16</sup> Easton, “Nothing Like D-Day.”
- <sup>17</sup> Joyu Wang, “Taiwan Amps Up Chinese-Invasion Drills to Deliver a Message: War Could Happen,” *Wall Street Journal*, 28 July 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taiwan-amps-up-chinese-invasion-drills-to-deliver-a-message-war-could-happen-705e6343>.
- <sup>18</sup> Easton, *Hostile Harbors*, 7, 9.
- <sup>19</sup> Ian Easton, *Hostile Harbors*, 20.

- <sup>20</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 96.
- <sup>21</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 3.
- <sup>22</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*.
- <sup>23</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 146–50.
- <sup>24</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 3.
- <sup>25</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 84–85.
- <sup>26</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 83.
- <sup>27</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 111.
- <sup>28</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 110.
- <sup>29</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 98.
- <sup>30</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Karnataka, India: True Sign Publishing House, 2021), 4.
- <sup>31</sup> Barton Whaley and Susan Stratton Aykroyd, *Practise to Deceive: Learning Curves of Military Deception Planners*, 1st ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016), xii–xiii.
- <sup>32</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Field Manual (FM) 3-13.4, *Army Support to Military Deception* (Fort Belvoir, VA: Army Publishing Directorate, 2019).
- <sup>33</sup> Wang Xuanming, *Thirty-Six Stratagems: Secret Art of War* (Singapore: Asiapac Books, 2003), 50–56.
- <sup>34</sup> FM 3-13.4, 1-1, 1-3.
- <sup>35</sup> FM 3-13.4, 1-6–1-7.
- <sup>36</sup> FM 3-13.4, 1-7.
- <sup>37</sup> Adapted by the author from content in FM 3-13.4, 1-6–1-11.
- <sup>38</sup> Barton Whaley, *Stratagem: Deception and Surprise in War* (Boston: Artech House, 2007), 459–462.
- <sup>39</sup> Robert J. Rielly, “Defeat from Victory: Korea 1950,” in *The Last 100 Yards: The Crucible of Close Combat in Large-Scale Combat Operations*, ed. Paul E. Berg (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, 2019), 122.
- <sup>40</sup> Whaley, *Stratagem: Deception and Surprise*, 460.
- <sup>41</sup> Whaley, *Stratagem: Deception and Surprise*, 460.
- <sup>42</sup> Whaley, *Stratagem: Deception and Surprise*, 461.
- <sup>43</sup> Rielly, *The Last 100 Yards*, 122; Whaley, *Stratagem: Deception and Surprise*, 462.
- <sup>44</sup> Rielly, *The Last 100 Yards*, 122.
- <sup>45</sup> Joseph G.D. Babb, “Chinese Deception and the 1950 Intervention in the Korean War,” in *Weaving the Tangled Web: Military Deception in Large-Scale Combat Operations*, ed. Christopher M. Rein (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, 2018), 162.
- <sup>46</sup> Whaley, *Stratagem: Deception and Surprise*, 462.
- <sup>47</sup> Developed by author.

- <sup>48</sup> Whaley, *Stratagem: Deception and Surprise*, 461.
- <sup>49</sup> Babb, “Chinese Deception,” 169.
- <sup>50</sup> Babb, “Chinese Deception,” 169.
- <sup>51</sup> Michael Pillsbury, “Chinese Deception Doctrine: A View from Open Sources,” in *The Art and Science of Military Deception*, eds. Hy Rothstein and Barton Whaley (Boston, MA: Artech House, 2013), 212–213.
- <sup>52</sup> Rick Chersicla, “Stop Talking About a ‘Chinese Way of War,’” *Diplomat*, 14 March 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/stop-talking-about-a-chinese-way-of-war/>.
- <sup>53</sup> Patrick Porter, “Good Anthropology, Bad History: The Cultural Turn in Studying War,” *Parameters* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 52.
- <sup>54</sup> Richard K Betts, “Surprise Despite Warning: Why Sudden Attacks Succeed,” *Political Science Quarterly* 95, no. 4 (Winter 1980–1981): 556.
- <sup>55</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 98.
- <sup>56</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 99.
- <sup>57</sup> Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, *The First Battle*, 98.
- <sup>58</sup> Developed by author.
- <sup>59</sup> Developed by author.
- <sup>60</sup> Developed by author.
- <sup>61</sup> Images created by the author in Bing Image Creator Powered by DALL-E3, 4 October 2023, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/edge/features/image-creator?form=MT00D8>.
- <sup>62</sup> “Civil aircraft fleet in China from 2015 to 2020, by type,” Statista, accessed 11 September 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/258253/civil-aircrafts-in-china-by-aircraft-type/#:~:text=In%202020%2C%20the%20Chinese%20civil,during%20the%20past%20five%20years>.
- <sup>63</sup> Easton, *Hostile Harbors*, 19.
- <sup>64</sup> Timothy M. Clauss, “The U.S. Army Airborne Division, 1942 to 1945: Concept, Combat, and Evolution,” (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2011), 46, 52.
- <sup>65</sup> “Rotary Wing Aircraft,” Operational Environment Data Integration Network (ODIN) Worldwide Equipment Guide, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, accessed 30 September 2023, [https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/WEG/List/DOM\\_air-13f10a&DOM\\_aircraft-42b8bd&DOM\\_rotary-wing-aircraft-8d8363](https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/WEG/List/DOM_air-13f10a&DOM_aircraft-42b8bd&DOM_rotary-wing-aircraft-8d8363); World Directory of Modern Military Aircraft (WDMMA), “People’s Liberation Army Air Force (2023),” accessed 30 September 2023, <https://www.wdmma.org/peoples-liberation-army-air-force-china.php>; WDMMA, “People’s Liberation Naval Air Force (2023),” accessed 30 September 2023, <https://www.wdmma.org/peoples-liberation-naval-air-force-china.php>; WDMMA, “People’s Liberation Army Ground Force (2023),” accessed 30 September 2023, <https://www.wdmma.org/peoples-liberation-army-ground-force-china.php>. Information from these websites on China’s number of transport helicopters (130x Z-8, 23x Z-20 and 258x MI-17s) combined in the PLAAF, PLAN and PLAN, multiplied by the troop capacity from the ODIN website (27, 12 and 24, respectively) produced single-lift capacity that was rounded to 10,000.
- <sup>66</sup> Jennifer Jett and Cheng Cheng, “China Had Almost 2 Million Excess Deaths after the End of ‘Zero-Covid,’ U.S. Study Finds,” *NBC News*, 25 August 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-excess-deaths-zero-covid-study-rcna101746>.

- <sup>67</sup> Eric C. Anderson and Jeffrey G. Engstrom, “China’s Use of Perception Management and Strategic Deception,” prepared for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission by Science Applications International Corporation, Reston, VA, November 2009, 18.
- <sup>68</sup> FM 3-13.4, 1-4.
- <sup>69</sup> FM 3-13.4, 1-5.
- <sup>70</sup> FM 3-13.4, 1-4.
- <sup>71</sup> John Culver, “How We Would Know When China is Preparing to Invade Taiwan,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 October 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/03/how-we-would-know-when-china-is-preparing-to-invade-taiwan-pub-88053>.
- <sup>72</sup> Culver, “How We Would Know.”
- <sup>73</sup> Cynthia M. Grabo, *Anticipating Surprise: Analysis for Strategic Warning* (Washington, DC: Joint Military Intelligence College, 2002), 130.
- <sup>74</sup> Christelle Nguyen, “How the Sino-Vietnamese War Was Purposefully Forgotten,” *Diplomat*, February 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/how-the-sino-vietnamese-war-was-purposefully-forgotten/>.





**Association of the United States Army**

2425 Wilson Boulevard  
Arlington, VA 22201

703.841.4300 ★ [www.ausa.org](http://www.ausa.org)