

Preventing China from Occupying the Senkaku Islands and Taiwan by 2025*

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Two security issues in the Indo-Pacific region continue to grow: China's increased attempts to take control of the Senkaku Islands from Japan and Beijing's desire to militarily force Taiwan to unify with China. In 2025, whether due to a severe world economic downturn, a massive earthquake in Japan, or a typhoon across Taiwan, Beijing's leadership could use the disaster(s) to exploit either scenario, to change the regional balance of power, and to seize control of its neighbors' territories. Relatedly, China's control of Taiwan's microchip production would have immeasurable impacts on the world.¹ While one or both scenarios could become a catalyst to draw the United States into war with China in the next two years, US leaders can get in front of the potential situations and alter their outcomes.

Security Issue: China Takes the Senkaku Islands from Japan

For more than a century, Japan, China, and Taiwan have each claimed ownership of the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea (ECS). These islands are vital to Japanese maritime control, international freedom of navigation, natural resources above and below the water, and military defense. Japan annexed the Senkaku Islands during the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895).² After World War II, the US administered control of the islands until 1970, when it returned control to Japan.³ Since then, most of the international community has recognized the islands as Japan's territory. When geological surveys in the 1970s revealed oil and gas deposits around the Senkaku Islands, China renewed its claim of the islands. Tensions came to a head in 1978, when the Chinese government sent more than 100 fishing vessels to the islands to control the area outright.⁴

Over the past few decades, China has desired to become the dominant state in the Indo-Pacific region and in the world and has worked to create a power transition.⁵ Part of Beijing's long game is to establish control of *the second island chain*, but before it can do that successfully, China must control the *first* island chain, which includes the Senkaku Islands.⁶ With that information, the United States

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could use its own *National Security Strategy* (*NSS*) to counter China's attempted power transition.⁷

Since the Senkaku Islands are part of the island chain nearest China and far from immediate US reinforcements, the United States must rely on partners and allies to amplify US power and influence in the region.⁸ Although China and Japan have said they do not want to go to war against each other, neither side is backing down from the slow buildup of tensions in the ECS. Relatedly, per a 1960 military alliance between the United States and Japan, the former agrees to defend Japan in the event another state attacks.⁹ Thus, Washington has a vested interest in China's actions toward Japan's territory—including the Senkaku Islands.

Among the *NSS* intents is to encourage state governments to grow democratically and succeed financially.¹⁰ As such, previous US leaders thought that as China grew in wealth and gross domestic product (GDP) during the 1990s and early 2000s it would gradually adopt capitalism as a way of life. So far, China's leaders have not followed that same logic. Instead, they used their newfound financial resources to clamp down on people and organizations that opposed the central government during that time and have continued doing so in the past few years.¹¹ As China continues to grow its GDP and develop its military, one of the concerns for the United States is that China will want to dominate more of the world stage.¹² To take the lead, China would need to cause a global power transition.

Parts I–III of the *NSS* are important for maintaining the balance of power in the region and specifically thwarting China's interest in wresting the Senkaku Islands from Japan. Since agreements and interactions between states are multi-layered and multifaceted, using all of the factors of the *NSS* are invaluable: statecraft, cybernetworks, military, and economics.¹³ As such, the *NSS* provides US leaders with a wide range of strategies to employ and execute, as best fit the changing situation in the ECS and surrounding areas. Thus, if one of the options in the *NSS* does not work, other options are still available. As the attempted power transition continues to play out over time around the world and specifically with the Senkaku Islands, Washington will need adhere to its national strategy.

Security Issue: China Invades Taiwan

If China were to invade Taiwan, the United States could begin a response with a coercive, multi-domain strategy including air, space, and cyber power. Per guidance from Joint Publication 3-0 (JP 3-0): *Joint Operations*, the Joint Operations Planning Group (JOPG) would consider the US Air Force's abilities and components in combination with those of other services.¹⁴ Specifically, JP 3-0 discusses "The Theater Campaign" and "Show of Force Operations" that relate to this scenario of China invading Taiwan.¹⁵ Likewise, Karl Mueller's work on coercion

highlights and explains in depth the value and costs of coercing a foreign government and its military into backing down from actions against another state.¹⁶

A coercive airpower strategy would provide a visible, immediate show of force to influence China to reverse its actions against Taiwan and withdraw its troops. Airpower would also quickly reassure Taiwan that the United States would protect and defend its partner state.¹⁷ Fighter jet flybys could deny China access to Taiwan's airspace. Jamming and overwatch could protect communication systems and sensors in the area.

Next, coercive spacepower strategy would limit and diminish China's access to communications between its command centers and deployed assets across the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. Spacepower is often unseen and not thought about when it is working correctly. However, when a state's communication channels and data-transfer capabilities are removed, it usually gets foreign leaders' attention—hard. From jamming China's satellite systems to degrading its communications, several viable options are at the decision makers' disposal. Consequently, while sophistication, subtlety, and caution are expected characteristics of political statecraft, a swift and result-driven response is necessary if China were to invade Taiwan, under any circumstances.¹⁸

Though airpower and spacepower are many times viewed separately, there is an additional part of these two coercive strategies that combines technologies from both: the threat of using missiles. Air-launched missiles—kinetic and nuclear—exist for the purpose of reminding the intended recipient that an even larger and more visible impact is an option. Air-launched missiles use the delivery-to-theater vehicle of aircraft and the precision guidance system of satellites. This option adds powerful leverage to the air, space, and cyberspace coercive strategies.

Also, a coercive cyberpower strategy could strangle China's ability to conduct a vast array of functions that are critical to a successful invasion in the twenty-first century.¹⁹ For example, options include sabotage, denial of service (DoS), electrical power-grid attacks, propaganda, and economic disruption.²⁰ And, if necessary, technicians could demonstrate a sample of extreme coercive cyberpower by making parts of mainland China go dark.²¹

To dispel China's invasion of Taiwan, the AF must be ready, willing, and able to deliver the coercive power strategies and options listed above, as part of a larger joint strategy. The appropriate USAF leaders and personnel can implement the plans and programs needed to succeed in this endeavor. Additionally, the United States needs to hedge its economic stability by increasing microchip production domestically. Meaning, by reducing its dependence on outside sources for microchips, the United States would fare better in the event of a disruption in Taiwan's production.

In summary, two security issues continue to grow in the Indo-Pacific region that have far-reaching impacts around the globe: China's desire to take control of the Senkaku Islands and Beijing's statements regarding forced unification with Taiwan. One or more disasters in the latter half of 2025 could open the door for both hypothetical situations to become a reality at that time. Therefore, the United States needs to be prepared for China's intentions and prevent them from happening. □

Notes

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