

Flash Traffic from Dagger Rock:

The Decisive Intelligence Advantages of a Limited, Clandestine USSOF Presence in Taiwan

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14. ABSTRACT Flash Traffic from Dagger Rock: The Decisive Intelligence Advantages of a Limited, Clandestine USSOF Presence in Taiwan The PRC remains dead fast in its commitment to fully reunify Taiwan, completing a nearly 80-year strategic objective. A Taiwan contingency plan remains one of the most significant issues for INDOPACOM and would require immediate, decisive intelligence to effectively coordinate response efforts. A limited, clandestine USSOF presence would provide decisive intelligence advantages for U.S. involvement in defending Taiwan from forceful reunification with China through a resilient special reconnaissance capability and a thorough understanding of the information environment, increasing joint lethality for long range precision fires.				
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Over the past several decades, the Chinese military has implemented a rapid and comprehensive development plan to bolster competitive advantages in all domains of warfare. Specifically, military improvements focused on enhancing Beijing's so-called anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) strategy centered around the reunification of Taiwan.¹ Coupled with significant increases in China's international influence and relevance, the expansion of military strength disparities between the opposing sides of the Taiwan Strait has increased Beijing's confidence in the forceful reunification of Taiwan.² Additionally, China would likely perceive any formal Taiwanese declaration of independence as the equivalent of a declaration of war and a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).³ The volatility of the cross-strait relationship and the intricate, strategic implications of any transition to armed conflict would necessitate American involvement, regardless of U.S. official policy on Taiwan.⁴ There is a consensus between Chinese and American defense experts that Taiwan represents the most likely flashpoint that would lead to direct military action between the two powers.⁵

To counter and prepare for further Chinese military aggression, the U.S., via Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), must review its theater security strategy to implement innovative, potentially drastic measures to support the planning and execution of full-spectrum contingency operations. Establishing and maintaining decisive intelligence capabilities that would enable broad options for U.S. response should be prioritized. These decisive intelligence capabilities

¹ Zuo Xiying. "Unbalanced Deterrence: Coercive Threat, Reassurance and the US-China Rivalry in Taiwan Strait." *Pacific review* 34, no. 4 (2021): 563.

² *Ibid.*, 550.

³ Robert S. Ross. "Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations." *International security* 27, No. 2 (2002): 54.

⁴ John Culver. 2020. "The Unfinished Chinese Civil War," The Lowy Institute, September 30, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/unfinished-chinese-civil-war>.

⁵ Kathrin Hille and Christian Shepherd. "Taiwan: Concern Grows over China's Invasion Threat," *Financial Times*, January 9, 2020: 1, <https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Ftrade-journals%2Ftaiwan-concern-grows-over-china-s-invasion-threat%2Fdocview%2F2334876730%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D322>.

would be especially important due to the assumed period when Taiwan will potentially defend itself until an American-led response is formed.⁶ A potential option that INDOPACOM could consider would be using U.S. special operations forces (USSOF) due to their unique intelligence advantages and strategically sensitive application. Additionally, a USSOF presence in Taiwan would satisfy the top three priorities that former INDOPACOM commander Admiral Davidson outlined in his March 9, 2021 address to Congress: increasing joint force lethality, enhancing design and posture, and strengthening allies and partners.⁷

This paper will argue that a limited, clandestine USSOF presence would provide decisive intelligence advantages for U.S. involvement in defending Taiwan from forceful reunification with China through a resilient special reconnaissance capability and a thorough understanding of the information environment, increasing joint force lethality, posture, and Taiwan interoperability. Additionally, this paper will acknowledge the intricacies of the historical U.S. policy regarding Taiwan and the resulting impact on the feasibility of a USSOF presence. This paper will review the value USSOF provides for intelligence operations and the immense risk of failing to incorporate a limited, clandestine USSOF presence in Taiwan. Finally, this paper will provide an analytical critique of the argument for a limited, clandestine USSOF presence in Taiwan to provide a decisive intelligence advantage U.S. involvement in defending Taiwan from forceful reunification with China.

Background: Acknowledgment of U.S. Policy Implications to Feasibility

The positioning of USSOF in Taiwan would represent a significant departure from the historic American policy of strategic ambiguity. However, it is becoming more apparent by

⁶ Ibid, 3.

⁷ U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee. "Statement of Admiral Philip S. Davidson, Commander, United Indo-Pacific Command", March 9, 2021: 3.

foreign affairs analysts like Richard Haas and David Sacks that “[t]he policy known as strategic ambiguity has... run its course. Ambiguity is unlikely to deter an increasingly assertive China with growing military capabilities.”⁸ Regardless of a continued policy of strategic ambiguity or a shift to strategic clarity, U.S. awareness and preparation will be critical for a necessary response.⁹ Per Taiwan Relations Act obligations, the U.S. should conduct a comprehensive review of U.S. military authorities regarding defense obligations for Taiwan to meet the modern challenges of cross-strait relations.¹⁰ The Taiwan Relations Act was created in a significantly different geopolitical environment and is arguably irrelevant to the context of rising Chinese power that directly threatens the continued existence of a democratic Taiwan.¹¹ As East Asia expert Richard Bush stated, the U.S. should “...consult in advance with leaders of Taiwan on any changes in U.S. policy toward the island—either positive or negative—before making them. Taiwan’s leaders are the best judges of whether those steps will serve their interests.”¹² Additionally, INDOPACOM should synchronize the introduction of USSOF in Taiwan with incremental, multifaceted changes to theater security strategy to alter the status quo in a more risk mitigated manner. This restructuring of INDOPACOM’s theater security strategy to include a bilateral agreement on USSOF in Taiwan would provide military and policy flexibility for utilizing separate tools of national power.

⁸ Haas Richard and David Sacks. “American Support for Taiwan Must Be Unambiguous.” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 99, No. 5. September 2, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/american-support-taiwan-must-be-unambiguous>.

⁹ Chen, Dean P. “US Taiwan Strait Policy: The Origins of Strategic Ambiguity”. Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner Press, 2012: 59.

¹⁰ 96th Congress. 1979. Taiwan Relations Act Public Law 96-8: 15.

¹¹ Paul Heer and John Culver. “The Strategic Dilemma of Taiwan’s Democracy.” *The National Interest*. December 22, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/strategic-dilemma-taiwan%E2%80%99s-democracy-174953>.

¹² Richard C. Bush. “One China Policy Primer.” Washington: The Brookings Institution, March 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/one-china-policy-primer.pdf>.

However, it is essential to clarify that an adjustment of U.S. policy towards Taiwan would not be unprecedented. President Eisenhower supported robust American integration into Taiwan's defensive concerns with the Mutual Security Program.¹³ For decades, the U.S. and Taiwan have conducted intelligence cooperation, including sharing intelligence from reconnaissance flights and signals intelligence (SIGINT) via a National Security Agency (NSA) site at Yangmingshan Mountain in northern Taiwan.¹⁴ More currently, the FY 2018 and FY 2019 National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA) required the U.S. “to enhance Taiwan’s self-defense capabilities, strengthen exchanges between senior US and Taiwan military officers, and promote opportunities for practical training and military exercises in the United States and Taiwan.”¹⁵ Finally, the U.S. has confirmed that active military forces, including the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps, have been stationed in Taiwan since 2005.¹⁶ Because of these historical and relevant examples, Taiwan's leadership agreement to and support of a limited, clandestine USSOF presence would be very likely to achieve a successful change of INDOPACOM theater security strategy.

Value of Special Operations Forces for Intelligence Operations

USSOF grants a viable option for the U.S. to conduct clandestine intelligence operations through limited force composition due to the innately unique tactics, techniques, procedures, and equipment associated with special operations. According to U.S. joint doctrine, special operations “[a]re often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically and/or diplomatically sensitive environments, and are characterized by one or more of the following: time-sensitivity,

¹³ Eric Setzekorn. “Eisenhower’s Mutual Security Program: Taiwan as a ‘Strategic Bargain.’” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 23, No. 1. 2016: 34.

¹⁴ Nancy Bernkopf Tucker. “Strait Talk : United States-Taiwan Relations and the Crisis with China,” Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009: 168; 260-261.

¹⁵ “Unbalanced Deterrence: Coercive Threat, Reassurance and the US-China Rivalry in Taiwan Strait”: 561.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

clandestine or covert nature, low visibility, work with or through indigenous forces, greater requirements for regional orientation and cultural expertise, and a higher degree of risk.”¹⁷

USSOF would effectively prepare and shape Taiwan's operation environment by setting conditions that mitigate risk and facilitate successful follow-on operations. USSOF's value is due primarily to the regional focus, cultural and ethnic insights, language capabilities, and specialized training of USSOF that conventional forces would otherwise not possess. USSOF would also provide the catalyst for the transition of military power from peace to conventional force-led armed conflict by gathering critical information, undermining Chinese will or capacity to wage war, and enhancing the capabilities of Taiwanese and U.S. conventional forces.¹⁸ USSOF integration into any U.S. plan for the defense of Taiwan would provide a marked improvement in intelligence collection and support of conventional force combat action.¹⁹

As East Asia expert Oriana Mastro stated: “If the United States does not get adequate warning of an impending Chinese amphibious attack on Taiwan, the US military is unlikely to be able to stop a Chinese *fait accompli*.”²⁰ To achieve this adequate warning, the U.S. must avoid collection gaps and provide the necessary context and patterns to quickly inform military and policy decisions.²¹ This risk avoidance is further important since a methodical, committed intelligence collection effort can provide less taxing means of warning by observing indicators associated with Chinese military strength, capabilities, and activities.²² As it always has, Taiwan

¹⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff. “Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations”. Washington, DC: Department of Defense. July 16, 2014: I-1.

¹⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff. “Joint Publication 3-0 Joint Operations”. Washington, DC: Department of Defense. October 22, 2018: VIII-7.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, IV-8.

²⁰ Oriana Skylar Mastro. “The Precarious State of Cross-Strait Deterrence. American Enterprise Institute Research Papers.” Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. February 18, 2021: 6.

²¹ Thomas Fingar. “Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security.” Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. 2011: 41.

²² Cynthia M. Grabo. “Anticipating Surprise: Analysis for Strategic Warning.” University Press of America. 2004: 51.

presents the strategic advantage of proximity for intelligence collection.²³ Ultimately, INDOPACOM should push for a limited, clandestine USSOF presence to provide decisive intelligence advantages for U.S. involvement in defending Taiwan from forceful reunification with China through a resilient special reconnaissance capability and a thorough understanding of the information environment, increasing joint force lethality, posture, and Taiwan interoperability.

Special Reconnaissance: Where Clandestine Actions, Persistence, and Resilience Intersect

According to U.S. joint doctrine, “[Special reconnaissance] entails reconnaissance and surveillance actions normally conducted in a clandestine or covert manner to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance, employing military capabilities not normally found in [conventional forces].”²⁴ Special reconnaissance is particularly valuable in enhancing collection strategies against high-value targets, like a Chinese landing force command post. The value of special reconnaissance is especially valid when near-continuous, all-weather, day and night surveillance is required to provide the necessary persistence for military action. The persistence of special reconnaissance enables timely decision-making processes and effective use of precision-guided munitions and assists in countering the adversarial use of military deception. USSOF is capable of exceptionally successful special reconnaissance missions, but a Taiwan presence would need to be limited in size due to the globally high demand and relatively small size compared to U.S. conventional forces.²⁵

It is critical to note that the physical environment of Taiwan would be conducive to USSOF intelligence collection operations. A majority of Taiwan’s coastline, some 1,200km, is

²³ “Strait Talk : United States-Taiwan Relations and the Crisis with China.”: 26.

²⁴ “Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations”: II-5, II-6.

²⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff. “Joint Publication 2-01 Joint and National Intelligence Support to Military Operations”. Washington, DC: Department of Defense. July 5, 2017: III-30.

comprised of reefs, rocky coves, sheer cliffs, mudflats, or blocked by offshore features. This complex coastline leaves 14 beaches suitable for seaborne invasion routes, which would allow USSOF intelligence collection efforts to be more focused.²⁶ Additionally, the USSOF presence could remain clandestine, or at least well protected, due to the immense mountains in Taiwan that provide their own defensive advantages.²⁷ USSOF can meet the demanding nature of clandestine intelligence collection against an invading Chinese force by recognizing the benefits of terrain and well-defined adversarial approaches.²⁸ USSOF would provide a resilient intelligence collection posture likely to survive conflict initiation and continue efforts when other collection means become inaccessible.

The Information Environment and Understanding Adversarial Decision Making

Special operations in Taiwan would require precise tactical-level planning, detailed intelligence preparation, and knowledge of the physical and human dimensions of the information environment to provide the decisiveness necessary for defending Taiwan from forceful reunification.²⁹ The physical dimension would comprise the command and control (C2) systems, key decision-makers, and supporting infrastructure through which China would create its desired effects. The aspects of the physical dimension would predominately manifest should a lodgment of Chinese military forces be established, but would be present before forceful reunification as well. This physical dimension would be vulnerable to direct USSOF intelligence collection efforts, positively influencing the U.S. military and policy courses of action.

Coincidentally, the human dimension would encompass the minds of Chinese leadership who transmit, receive, and respond to or act on information. The human dimension would also

²⁶ “Taiwan: Concern Grows over China’s Invasion Threat”: 2.

²⁷ Ibid, 3.

²⁸ “Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security”: 36.

²⁹ “Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations”: I-2.

include the Chinese information processing, perception, judgment, and decision making. These elements would be influenced by factors such as Chinese cultural beliefs, norms, motivations, emotions, experiences, morals, and education. Because the human dimension is the most critical component of the information environment, understanding how these factors influence Chinese decision-making will innately be decisive for U.S. military action.³⁰

USSOF, through its unique training and capabilities, would provide the penetration of Chinese physical and human dimensions of the information environment for a more thorough understanding of intent and rapid intelligence warning dissemination.³¹ USSOF can be thoroughly trained on the intricacies of the Chinese language and cultural aspects and the technical complexities of Chinese military hardware involved in the information environment, which would be catalysts for intelligence collection and exploitation opportunities. Specifically, USSOF would leverage military source operations (MSO) and tactical SIGINT as means to collect decisive intelligence in support of U.S. support for the defense of Taiwan.^{32;33} The capability to conduct these collection operations organically and rapidly incorporate the intelligence into military operations is a critical role of USSOF that would provide immense opportunities for INDOPACOM.

Enabling INDOPACOM Priorities

USSOF would enable the decisive intelligence necessary to execute long-range precision fires by integrating special reconnaissance and understanding the information environment.

According to U.S. joint doctrine, “Fires are the use of weapon systems or other actions to create

³⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff. “Joint Publication 3-13 Information Operations”. Washington, DC: Department of Defense. November 20, 2014: I-2, I-3.

³¹ “Anticipating Surprise: Analysis for Strategic Warning”: 103.

³² Joint Chiefs of Staff. “Joint Publication 2-0 Joint Intelligence”. Washington, DC: Department of Defense. October 22, 2013: B-4.

³³ “Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations”: II-6; IV-3.

specific lethal or nonlethal effects on a target... (J)oint fires are... from two or more components in coordinated action to produce desired effects in support of a common objective... (T)argeting is the process of selecting and prioritizing targets and matching the appropriate response to them, considering operational requirements and capabilities.”³⁴ The U.S. firmly understands the value of effective joint fires and intelligence's criticality in executing timely targeting. Likewise, Chinese military strategists like Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui recognize the strategic advantage of efficiently improving precision fires. “Precision-kill weapons can hit a target precisely, reducing collateral casualties, and like a gamma knife which can excise a tumor with hardly any bleeding, it has led to "surgical" strikes and other such new tactics so that inconspicuous combat actions can achieve extremely notable strategic results.”³⁵ USSOF would support the flow of intelligence necessary for joint precision fires by clandestinely maintaining a persistent presence through its special reconnaissance capability.³⁶

As former INDOPACOM Commander Admiral Davidson stated in his Congressional address: “Increasing joint force lethality means developing and fielding systems and capabilities to ensure U.S. freedom of action or access to vital waterways and airspace, while preserving our critical asymmetrical advantages to deter aggression and prevail in armed conflict should deterrence fail.”³⁷ This joint force lethality is exceptionally pertinent for the potential A2/AD environment, which would impose immense complications for traditional targeting without pre-conflict mitigations. Additionally, Admiral Davidson emphasized improving U.S. defense posture and interoperability with key allies and partners. “It requires a deterrent posture that

³⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff. “Joint Publication 3-09 Joint Fire Support”. Washington, DC: Department of Defense. April 10, 2019: I-3.

³⁵ Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui. “Unrestricted Warfare”. Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House. 2019: 28.

³⁶ “Joint Publication 2-0 Joint Intelligence”: IV-22.

³⁷ “Statement of Admiral Philip S. Davidson, Commander, United Indo-Pacific Command”: 7.

possesses the sustainment and force protection to be resilient, survivable, and supportable. Persistent presence through forward-based and rotational joint forces is the most credible way to demonstrate our commitment and resolve to potential adversaries while simultaneously assuring allies and partners”.³⁸ As well as enabling joint force lethality, USSOF would provide that exquisite forward-based posture while providing assurance of U.S. resolve to specifically informed Taiwanese leadership. USSOF innately represents an essential force multiplier capability to capitalize on a limited, clandestine presence for decisive intelligence collection and operational preparedness.

Analytical Critique: Technologically Advanced Collection Methods Are More Decisive

It would be easy to argue that USSOF intelligence operations in Taiwan would not be decisive due to the technological advancements in intelligence collection. Specifically, space-based imagery and signals intelligence collection provide robust collection capabilities to meet national requirements. These systems have proven crucial to U.S. intelligence collection efforts globally for the past several decades, with countless successes justifying their validity. However, this argument is fundamentally flawed due to the strategic vulnerability of over-reliance on specialized collection assets and fatal disregard of Chinese capabilities and strategy. A specific area of concern is China's threat of denial and deception, which would deny and deceive collection efforts from existing national intelligence collection architecture assets.³⁹ China has dramatically improved its space and electronic warfare capabilities, which would hamper U.S. and Taiwan's efforts to gather critical intelligence necessary for military action.⁴⁰ In the Chinese view, these advancements would negate U.S. information dominance and the corresponding

³⁸ Ibid, 8.

³⁹ “Joint Publication 2-0 Joint Intelligence”: I-4.

⁴⁰ “Taiwan: Concern Grows over China’s Invasion Threat”: 2.

effectiveness of U.S. targeting capabilities, establishing the desired A2/AD environment that China wishes to capitalize on during forceful reunification.⁴¹

Moreover, a USSOF presence in Taiwan would prove decisive should other national intelligence assets become inaccessible. Fundamentally, U.S. intelligence collection doctrine supports the integration of SOF for a more holistic, survivable intelligence collection posture.⁴² An essential component of that survivability is redundancy in providing critical intelligence for targeting purposes.⁴³ The special reconnaissance capability and information environment understanding that USSOF provides would be crucial in the anticipated A2/AD environment that China aims to impose on an American-led response. Special reconnaissance would complement strategic and operational level intelligence collection efforts by obtaining specific, well-defined, and time-sensitive intelligence with direct observation of Chinese forces.⁴⁴ A potential means by which USSOF could conduct this direct observation, which would prove more decisive than national means, would be the use of unique manned and unmanned sensors that provide more exquisite situational awareness.⁴⁵ Regardless of how USSOF implementation in Taiwan takes form, the intelligence collected would be decisive and directly impact U.S. gained initiative for military and policy response options.

Conclusion

The imperative for improving the intelligence collection posture in Taiwan is profoundly dire. Recent war games conducted by the Department of Defense and think tanks have indicated a high likelihood of U.S. defeat in a cross-strait conflict should timely targeting capabilities not

⁴¹ “Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations”: 72.

⁴² “Joint Publication 2-01 Joint and National Intelligence Support to Military Operations”: III-15.

⁴³ “Joint Publication 2-0 Joint Intelligence”: III-13.

⁴⁴ “Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations”: I-5, I-6.

⁴⁵ “Joint Publication 2-0 Joint Intelligence”: III-13.

be heavily incorporated.⁴⁶ However, this does not have to be the inevitable path of U.S. involvement in Taiwan. INDOPACOM and policymakers must proactively review the current U.S. intelligence collection posture to ensure strategic warning of Chinese aggression and flexibility of U.S. response.⁴⁷ For the U.S. to regain the initiative and improve its odds of supporting Taiwan's defense from forceful reunification, timely and impactful intelligence is paramount. A limited, clandestine USSOF presence would provide these decisive intelligence advantages through a resilient special reconnaissance capability and thorough understanding of the information environment, which would increase joint force lethality, posture, and Taiwan interoperability.

⁴⁶ "The Precarious State of Cross-Strait Deterrence. American Enterprise Institute Research Papers": 2.

⁴⁷ Michael O. Hanlon. "Why China Cannot Conquer Taiwan." *International Security* 25, No. 2 (2000): 86.