

Countdown to World War III?

It May Arrive Sooner Than You Think

By [Michael T. Klare](#)

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When the Department of Defense released its [annual report](#) on Chinese military strength in early November, one claim generated headlines around the world. By 2030, it suggested, China would probably have 1,000 nuclear warheads — three times more than at present and enough to pose a substantial threat to the United States. As a Washington Post headline [put it](#), typically enough: “China accelerates nuclear weapons expansion, seeks 1,000 warheads or more, Pentagon says.”

The media, however, largely ignored a far more significant claim in that same report: that China would be ready to conduct “intelligentized” warfare by 2027, enabling the Chinese to effectively resist any U.S. military response should it decide to invade the island of Taiwan, which they view as a renegade province. To the newsmakers of this moment, that might have seemed like far less of a headline-grabber than those future warheads, but the implications couldn’t be more consequential. Let me, then, offer you a basic translation of that finding: as the Pentagon sees things, be prepared for World War III to break out any time after January 1, 2027.

To appreciate just how terrifying that calculation is, four key questions have to be answered. What does the Pentagon mean by “intelligentized” warfare? Why would it be so significant if China achieved it? Why do U.S. military officials assume that a war over Taiwan could erupt the moment China masters such warfare? And why would such a war over Taiwan almost certainly turn into World War III, with every likelihood of going nuclear?

Why “Intelligentization” Matters

First, let’s consider “intelligentized” warfare. Pentagon officials routinely assert that China’s military, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), already outmatches the U.S. in sheer numbers — more troops, more tanks, more planes, and especially more ships. Certainly, numbers do

matter, but in the sort of high-paced [“multi-domain” warfare](#) American strategists envision for the future, “information dominance” — in the form of superior intelligence, communications, and battlefield coordination — is expected to matter more. Only when the PLA is “intelligentized” in this fashion, so the thinking goes, will it be able to engage U.S. forces with any confidence of success.

The naval aspect of the military balance between the two global powers is considered especially critical since any conflict between them is expected to erupt either in the South China Sea or in the waters around Taiwan. Washington analysts regularly emphasize the PLA’s superiority in sheer numbers of combat naval “platforms.” A Congressional Research Service (CRS) report released in October, for instance, [noted](#) that “China’s navy is, by far, the largest of any country in East Asia, and within the past few years it has surpassed the U.S. Navy in numbers of battle force ships, making China’s navy the numerically largest in the world.” Statements like these are routinely cited by Congressional hawks to secure more naval funding to close the “gap” in strength between the two countries.

As it happens, though, a careful review of comparative naval analyses suggests that the U.S. still enjoys a commanding lead in critical areas like intelligence collection, target acquisition, anti-submarine warfare, and data-sharing among myriad combat platforms — sometimes called C4ISR (for command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), or to use the Chinese terms, “informationized” and “intelligentized” warfare.

“Although China’s naval modernization effort has substantially improved China’s naval capabilities in recent years,” the CRS report noted, “China’s navy currently is assessed as having limitations or weaknesses in certain areas, including joint operations with other parts of China’s military, antisubmarine warfare, [and] long-range targeting.”

This means that, at the moment, the Chinese would be at a severe disadvantage in any significant encounter with American forces over Taiwan, where mastery of surveillance and targeting data would be essential for victory. Overcoming its C4ISR limitations has, therefore, become a major priority for the Chinese military, superseding the quest for superiority in numbers alone. According to the [2021 Pentagon report](#), this task was made a top-level priority in 2020 when the 5th Plenum of the 19th Central Committee established “a new milestone for modernization in 2027, to accelerate the integrated development of mechanization, informatization, and intelligentization of the PRC’s armed forces.” The achievement of such advances, the Pentagon added, “would provide Beijing with more credible military options in a Taiwan contingency.”

Five years is not a lot of time in which to acquire mastery over such diverse and technically challenging military capabilities, but American analysts nonetheless believe that the PLA is well on its way to achieving that 2027 milestone. To overcome its “capability gap” in C4ISR, the Pentagon report noted, “the PLA is investing in joint reconnaissance, surveillance, command, control, and communications systems at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels.”

If, as predicted, China succeeds by 2027, it will then be able to engage the U.S. Navy in the seas around Taiwan and potentially defeat it. This, in turn, would allow Beijing to bully the Taiwanese without fear of intervention from Washington. As suggested by the Defense Department in its 2021 report, China’s leadership has “connected the PLA’s 2027 goals to developing the capabilities to counter the U.S. military in the Indo-Pacific region and compel

Taiwan's leadership to the negotiation table on Beijing's terms."

Beijing's Taiwan Nightmare

Ever since Chiang Kai-shek and the remnants of his Chinese Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang, or KMT) fled to Taiwan after the Communist takeover of China in 1949, establishing the Republic of China (ROC) on that island, the Communist Party leadership in Beijing has sought Taiwan's "reunification" with the mainland. Initially, Taiwanese leaders also dreamed of reconquering the mainland (with U.S. help, of course) and extending the ROC's sway to all of China. But after Chiang died in 1975 and Taiwan transitioned to democratic rule, the KMT lost ground to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which eschews integration with the mainland, seeking instead to establish an independent Taiwanese state.

As talk of independence has gained favor there, Chinese officials have sought to coax the Taiwanese public into accepting peaceful reunification by promoting cross-strait trade and tourism, among other measures. But the appeal of independence appears to be growing, especially among younger Taiwanese who have recoiled at Beijing's clampdown on civil liberties and democratic rule in Hong Kong — a fate they fear awaits them, should Taiwan ever fall under mainland rule. This, in turn, has made the leadership in Beijing increasingly anxious, as any opportunity for the peaceful reunification of Taiwan appears to be slipping away, leaving military action as their only conceivable option.

President Xi Jinping expressed the conundrum Beijing faces well in his November 15th Zoom interchange with President Biden. "Achieving China's complete reunification is an aspiration shared by all sons and daughters of the Chinese nation," he [stated](#). "We have patience and will strive for the prospect of peaceful reunification with utmost sincerity and efforts. That said, should the separatist forces for Taiwan independence provoke us, force our hands, or even cross the red line, we will be compelled to take resolute measures."

In fact, what Xi calls the "separatist forces for Taiwan independence" have already gone far beyond provocation, affirming that Taiwan is indeed an independent state in all but name and that it will never voluntarily fall under mainland rule. This was evident, for example, in an October 10th address by Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. The island, she [declared](#), must "resist annexation or encroachment upon our sovereignty," directly rejecting Beijing's right to ever rule Taiwan.

But if China does use force — or is "compelled to take resolute measures," as Xi put it — Beijing would likely have to contend with a U.S. counterstroke. Under existing legislation, notably [the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act](#), the United States is under no obligation to aid Taiwan in such circumstances. However, that act also states that any use of force to alter Taiwan's status will be viewed as a matter "of grave concern to the United States" — a stance known as "strategic ambiguity" as it neither commits this country to a military response, nor rules it out.

Recently, however, prominent figures in Washington have begun calling for "strategic clarity" instead, all but guaranteeing a military response to any Chinese strike against the island. "The United States needs to be clear that we will not allow China to invade Taiwan and subjugate it," Arkansas Republican Senator Tom Cotton typically said in a [February 2021 address](#) at the Ronald Reagan Institute. "I think the time has come to be clear:

Replace strategic ambiguity with strategic clarity that the United States will come to the aid of Taiwan if China was to forcefully invade Taiwan or otherwise change the status quo across the [Taiwan] Strait.”

President Biden, too, seemed to embrace just such a position recently. When asked during an October CNN “town hall” whether the United States would protect Taiwan, he [answered](#) bluntly, “Yes, we have a commitment to do that.” The White House would later walk that statement back, insisting that Washington still adheres to the Taiwan Relations Act and a [“One China” policy](#) that identifies both Taiwan and mainland China as part of a single nation. Nonetheless, the administration has continued to [conduct](#) massive air and sea maneuvers in the waters off Taiwan, suggesting an inclination to defend Taiwan against any future invasion.

Clearly, then, Chinese policymakers must count on at least the possibility of U.S. military intervention should they order an invasion of Taiwan. And from their perspective, this means it won’t be safe to undertake such an invasion until the PLA has been fully intelligentized — a milestone it will achieve in 2027, if the Pentagon analysis is correct.

The Road to World War III

Nobody can be sure what the world will look like in 2027 or just how severe tensions over Taiwan could be by then. To take but one example, the DPP could lose to the KMT in that island’s 2024 presidential elections, reversing its march toward independence. Alternatively, China’s leadership could decide that a long-term accommodation with a quasi-independent Taiwan was the best possible recourse for maintaining its significant global economic status.

If, however, you stick with the Pentagon’s way of thinking, things look grim. You would have to assume that Taiwan will continue its present course and that Beijing’s urge to secure the island’s integration with the mainland will only intensify. Likewise, you would have to assume that the inclination of Washington policymakers to support an ever-more-independent Taiwan in the face of Chinese military action will only grow, as relations with Beijing continue to spiral downward.

From this circumscribed perspective, all that’s holding China’s leaders back from using force to take Taiwan right now is their concern over the PLA’s inferiority in intelligentized warfare. Once that’s overcome — in 2027, by the Pentagon’s reckoning — nothing will stand in the way of a Chinese invasion or possibly World War III.

Under such circumstances, it’s all too imaginable that Washington might move from a stance of “strategic stability” to one of “strategic clarity,” providing Taiwan’s leadership with an ironclad guarantee of military support in the face of any future attack. While this wouldn’t alter Chinese military planning significantly — PLA strategists undoubtedly assume that the U.S. would intervene, pledge or not — it could lead to complaisance in Washington, to a conviction that Beijing would automatically be deterred by such a guarantee (as Senator Cotton and many others seem to think). In the process, both sides could instead find themselves on the path to war.

And take my word for it, a conflict between them, however it began, could prove hard indeed to confine to the immediate neighborhood of Taiwan. In [any such engagement](#), the principal job of China’s forces would be to degrade American air and naval forces in the western Pacific. This could end up involving the widespread use of cruise and ballistic

missiles to strike U.S. ships, as well as its bases in Japan, South Korea, and on various Pacific islands. Similarly, the principal job of the U.S. military would be to [degrade Chinese air and naval forces](#), as well as its missile-launching facilities on the mainland. The result could be instant escalation, including relentless air and missile attacks, possibly even the use of the most advanced hypersonic missiles then in the U.S. and Chinese arsenals.

The result would undoubtedly be tens of thousands of combat casualties on both sides, as well as the loss of major assets like aircraft carriers and port facilities. Such a set of calamities might, of course, prompt one side or the other to cut its losses and pull back, if not surrender. The likelier possibility, however, would be a [greater escalation in violence](#), including strikes ever farther afield with ever more powerful weaponry. Heavily populated cities could come under attack in China, Taiwan, Japan, or possibly elsewhere, producing hundreds of thousands of casualties.

Unless one side or the other surrendered — and which of these two proud nations is likely to do that? — such a conflict would continue to expand with each side calling for support from its allies. China would undoubtedly turn to Russia and Iran, the U.S. to Australia, India, and Japan. (Perhaps anticipating just such a future, the Biden administration only recently forged a [new military alliance](#) with Australia and the United Kingdom called AUKUS, while beefing up its [“Quad” security arrangement](#) with Australia, India, and Japan.)

In this way, however haltingly, a new “world war” could emerge and, worse yet, could easily escalate. Both the U.S. and China are already working hard to [deploy hypersonic missiles](#) and more conventional weaponry meant to target the other side’s vital defense nodes, including early-warning radars, missile batteries, and command-and-control centers, only increasing the risk that either side could misconstrue such a “conventional” attack as the prelude to a nuclear strike and, out of desperation, decide to strike first. Then we’re *really* talking about World War III.

Today, this must seem highly speculative to most of us, but to war planners in the Department of Defense and the Chinese Ministry of Defense, there’s nothing speculative about it. Pentagon officials are convinced that China is indeed determined to ensure Taiwan’s integration with the mainland, by force if necessary, and believe that there’s a good chance they’ll be called upon to help defend the island should that occur. As history suggests — think of the years leading up to World War I — planning of this sort can all too easily turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So, however speculative all of this may seem, it should be taken seriously by any of us who dread the very idea of a major future outbreak of war, let alone a catastrophe on the scale of World Wars I and II, or with nuclear weapons on a scale as yet unknown. If such a fate is to be avoided, far more effort will have to go into solving the Taiwan dilemma and finding a peaceful resolution to the island’s status.

As a first step (though don’t count on it these days), Washington and Beijing could agree to curtail their military maneuvers in the waters and airspace around Taiwan and consult with each other, as well as Taiwan’s representatives, on tension-reducing measures of various sorts. Talks could also be held on steps to limit the deployment of especially destabilizing weapons of any kind, including hypersonic missiles.

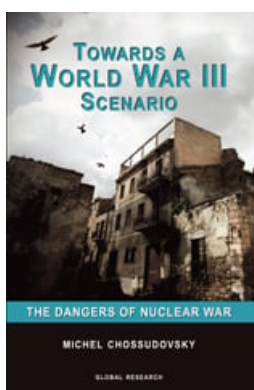
If the Pentagon is right, however, the time for such action is already running out. After all, 2027, and the possible onset of World War III, is only five years away.

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Michael T. Klare, a [TomDispatch regular](#), is the five-college professor emeritus of peace and world security studies at Hampshire College and a senior visiting fellow at the Arms Control Association. He is the author of 15 books, the latest of which is [All Hell Breaking Loose: The Pentagon's Perspective on Climate Change](#). He is a founder of the [Committee for a Sane U.S.-China Policy](#).

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[“Towards a World War III Scenario: The Dangers of Nuclear War”](#)

by Michel Chossudovsky

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[Michel Chossudovsky](#) is Professor of Economics at the University of Ottawa and Director of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), which hosts the critically acclaimed website www.globalresearch.ca. He is a contributor to the Encyclopedia Britannica. His writings have been translated into more than 20 languages.

Reviews

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