

Defending a “Scenario of a Mock Invasion of Taiwan” Signals Shift for Army Special Operations

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Global Research, May 03, 2023

[Military.com](#) 29 April 2023

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Members of the U.S. [Army](#)’s Special Operations Command fired Carl Gustaf recoilless rifles, breached tunnels and operated Switchblade drones that flew with an unsettling whiz over a training area on Thursday. The exercise combined some of the hallmark tactics and weapons that were used during the Global War on Terror with other tools reflecting a seismic shift for the command as it prepares for potential conflict against major military rivals.

The training was part of the USASOC’s annual capabilities exercise, or CAPEX, and the mission they were gaming out was an insertion into Taiwan to defend against a Chinese invasion.

It was the first-ever use of a Taiwan scenario for the exercise, with a concrete mock-up meant to represent that country. So instead of hovering eight thousand miles away in the South China Sea where the island actually is perched, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment’s [Chinooks](#) landed on Range 68 at [Fort Bragg](#).

“The [People’s Republic of China], in accordance with our national defense strategy, is our true pacing challenge out there,” Lt. Gen. Jonathan P. Braga, commanding general of USASOC, said in a speech ahead of the exercise.

“Ultimately, what we are trying to do is prevent World War III,” he said. “That’s our job.”

The exercise comes as U.S. defense planners are focusing their attention on deterring China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific and around the world, part of escalating hostilities that have made headlines when Chinese spy balloons penetrated U.S. airspace and Chinese drones [circled](#) the island of Taiwan, for example.

While the “ultimate backstop” remains America’s nuclear capabilities, according to the

Pentagon's National Defense Strategy, USASOC leaders view it as their mission to prove that they're also ready for conventional conflict if it arises.

The organization pulled no punches in naming China and its military, the People's Liberation Army, or PLA, however as the opposition force during the exercise, an unusually direct move, given the military's hesitancy to overtly suggest conflict.

"I'm going to receive a brief from my boss giving us a task to conduct an operation to counter the PLA on the island of Taiwan," a Green Beret officer announced to a crowd of more than 100 members of the public, most of whom were from nonprofit or charity organizations that support the [special operations](#) community, prior to a demonstrated attack.

Soldiers who participated in the exercise requested that Military.com not use their names to protect their identities ahead of potential future deployments.

Some civilians even got to participate in the exercise, acting as partner forces as the kitted-out [Special Forces](#) soldiers walked them through a squad attack, for example, in which troops on foot close in on an enemy.

But before they kicked down doors to meet the hypothetical escalatory advances of the ghost People's Liberation Army, the soldiers participating in the exercise described their work as perfecting the fundamentals of warfare.

"We have to be a lot more prepared and be better at the basic things," one senior civil affairs noncommissioned officer told Military.com. The soldier also left Ukraine in early 2022 after training Ukrainians.

"It's just reinforcing the basics and then putting it in a different perspective, applying it in a different way," they said, specifically referencing how directing displaced people after a crisis has been a staple of their trade since the Global War on Terror, and before.

Soldiers demonstrated their language capabilities, though instead of the Pashto and Dari, they employed intermediate to high levels of Mandarin or Russian. In fact, the language school at USASOC broadly no longer teaches those two languages spoken in Afghanistan, instead offering tests to keep soldiers who already know them fresh, according to one of the instructors. Now, it is looking to offer courses in Ukrainian and Japanese.

NCOs gestured around miniature prison camps, with primitive bamboo bows and fire starters as they offered instruction on evasion from capture tactics. A black uniform with Cyrillic text sat next to these items to demonstrate what instructors might now wear at the military's Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape, or SERE school.

Perhaps the most prevalent theme came from the psychological operations soldiers who preached the information operation game as critical for the Army during a crisis with a near-peer actor. Instead of leaflets and megaphones, they talked of memes and enemy disinformation on a global scale.

"The information environment — it can seem overwhelming at times — just the sheer size of it, the amount of information going in and out of it," one senior psychological operations NCO said.

“What’s important, what’s just white noise?” he added. “How do you navigate all of that, and create order out of chaos, so that you can gain the informational advantage over an enemy that does not operate with the same restrictions and rules that you’re going to have to operate under.”

A term that came up often was “the gray zone,” a euphemism referring to tactics that countries like Russia and China use, for example, working through non-state actors in the cyber realm to carry out state missions. It’s a means of flouting international law and creating legal deniability while engaging in low-level war.

Braga said that staying competitive without escalating to a crisis or direct conflict is “a nuanced game of shadows in the gray-zone” — one that requires a balance that USASOC is trying to maintain.

That nuance has not come without challenges, however, especially when it comes to shedding or pocketing some of the tactics and mindsets so baked into the organization from its intense time fighting the Global War on Terror, a mission that still is ongoing today, though at a much smaller scale than before the withdrawal from Afghanistan nearly two years ago.

“We don’t necessarily want to lose it. We need to use the lessons learned from that and tailor it to a different fight against a near-peer competitor in a multi-domain environment, essentially,” a Green Beret told Military.com on Thursday.

“And it’s difficult because fighting a near-peer requires a lot more preparation that’s not really the cool stuff that we’ve been doing for the last 20 years. I’m telling my guys as a company commander to stop going to the shoot houses and do more preparation tasks, which aren’t nearly as cool or fun to do,” he said.

“So there’s some growing pains there, but we’re getting the formation in the right direction, and I think we’re going to be alright when the time comes.”

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Featured image: Soldiers in the 75th Ranger Regiment conduct a fast rope onto a building during a mock Chinese invasion into Taiwan (Courtesy, U.S. Army)

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