

The Seaborne Security Force: The United States Navy, Countering China in the South China Sea, and an Innovative Solution for Global Naval Security

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Abstract: *The tensions between the Taiwanese and Chinese governments have been increasing in recent months, with many national security experts and academics finding a conflict in the South China Sea likely in 2023. China's naval forces are the largest in the world and this is perhaps their greatest strength, while Taiwan's navy remains dwarfed by their greatest adversary. While a conflict in the South China Sea would not be easy and U.S. support would surely assist Taiwan, creating a security force assistance (SFA) unit staffed by U.S. Naval officers to focus on teaching, training, and providing assistance to the Taiwanese Navy could prove beneficial in countering the Chinese military. By providing expert intelligence, military strategy advice on naval operations, and training Taiwanese officers in naval combat tactics, such a unit could be able to benefit not only Taiwan, but other allied nations with an interest in a non-China dominated South China Sea (e.g., Australia, Japan, South Korea).*

Keywords: *Security Force Assistance, U.S. Navy, Foreign Internal Defense, National Defense, International Security, China, Taiwan*

Advisors are a key aspect of military policy and strategy. They typically assist in a multipronged approach; they assist in developing U.S. foreign and military policy goals by building up a national security framework in a foreign land, in addition to helping a foreign allied nation better develop their skills at performing various kinds of operations. More often than not, these are sensitive national security missions such as counterinsurgency and counterterrorism but can also be missions in teaching foreign soldiers demolition and weapons tactics, alongside assisting them in the development of intelligence networks, communications systems, and logistic-supply lines.

In modern military conflicts, advisors are a method by which powerful nation-states (i.e., the United States) can support their allies abroad. Nowhere would such an advisory unit be more

successful and important than in Taiwan, where American advisors could provide combat and combat support to Taiwanese naval units to counter Chinese naval forces in the event of an all-out invasion of Taiwan by China.

The Definition of Security Force Assistance

While advisors exist in a variety of capacities across branches, currently, the United States Army is the only branch carrying out large Security Force Assistance (SFA). The Army does so through their Security Force Assistance Brigades, also known as SFABs. Security force assistance is defined as:

the unified action to generate, employ, and sustain local, host-nation, or regional security forces in support of a legitimate authority ... conducted across the spectrum of conflict or in any of the operational themes [and normally] part of a larger security sector reform effort, while in other instances, security force assistance is not tied to reform but to building partner capacity.”¹

While very similar to the concept of foreign internal defense, the two are not the same. Foreign internal defense, according to Joint Publication 3-22 of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the U.S. Armed Forces, is defined as “the participation by civilian agencies and military forces of a government or international organization in any of the programs or activities taken by a host nation government to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, violent extremism, terrorism, and other threats to its security.”² Foreign internal defense is conducted under the banner of the U.S. Department of Defense, with constant cooperation by Special Operations Forces and geographic level combatant commands, while also entailing:

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¹ U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of the Army, *Field Manual No. 3-07.1* (Washington, D.C., 2009), pg. v, <https://issat.dcaf.ch/download/54519/880346/US%20Army%20FM%203-07.1%20Security%20Force%20Assistance%202009.pdf>.

² U.S. Department of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-22 Foreign Internal Defense* (Washington, D.C., Pentagon, 17 August 2018), pg. ix-x, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_22.pdf?ver=2018-10-10-112450-103.

[security cooperation] activities (programs and authorities) integrated with interagency activities ... [involving] indirect support (training [host nation] security forces), direct support (e.g., intelligence cooperation, logistic support, and civil-military operations), and [foreign internal defense] US combat operations, all in unified action with interagency and multinational partners as required.³

It is very important to note here that foreign internal defense is not completely, or solely, a combat-oriented operation or mission; it can include all facets of a military mission from sustainment to intelligence gathering to combat support. In fact, having foreign internal defense be a purely combat mission will more than likely negatively affect the host nation's operations. The differences here may seem minor or otherwise insignificant, however, they are quite important to understanding America's counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions. Major Derek C. Jenkins, formerly a U.S. Air Force staff officer with the LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Doctrine, works to define both terms. Jenkins clarifies in an article for the online publication *Small Wars Journal* that:

The focus of all US foreign internal defense efforts is to support the Host Nation's (HN) program of Internal Defense and Development ... If an insurgency, illicit drug, terrorist, or other threat develops, [internal defense and development] becomes an active approach to fight that threat. SFA differs from foreign internal defense in that foreign internal defense primarily deals with internal threats. SFA deals with internal and external threats as they are often connected, and SFA focuses on the same security forces that deal with both types of threats.⁴

One way to put this is that security force assistance can be classified as the larger, overall strategic-level assistance one nation provides to a host nation while foreign internal defense is the more tactical, internal level of nation-to-nation defense assistance being provided. In short,

³ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-22 Foreign Internal Defense*, pg. x.

⁴ Derek C. Jenkins, "Distinguishing Between Security Force Assistance & Foreign Internal Defense: Determining A Doctrine Road-Ahead," *Small Wars Journal*, Small Wars Journal, published 10 December 2008, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/146-jenkins.pdf>.

these forms of assistance, foreign internal defense and security force assistance, are closely related in some points, but clearly quite different in theory and implementation.

For the most part, both foreign internal defense and security force assistance is conducted by members of other branches outside of the U.S. Army. These include the Marine Corps Special Operations Command, U.S. Navy SEALs, and U.S. Army Special Forces. The units conducting these operations are ones more familiar with counterterrorism missions, counterinsurgency missions, and the technical aspects of search and destroy, hostage rescue, special reconnaissance, and other combat-oriented tactics. While these missions each revolve around key military areas like logistical support, air superiority and targeting, intelligence collection, and communications, these specific operations are clearly more combat driven and will therefore be limited to a direct-action response.

Foreign internal defense and security force assistance missions are far more than ground warfare or combat focused; they are everything needed in creating a legitimate, capable nation-state that has a functioning military arm, law enforcement body, and effective government. The United States military, it seems, limits itself to having these operations be solely combat focused, in addition to having these military aspects be dealt with by the U.S. Army, only. Furthermore, the entire role of security force assistance and foreign internal defense seems limited in that many of the units conducting these missions (or being recruited into one of the security force assistance brigades), come from the special operations forces of the Army or the respective branch carrying out such a mission. There is a need for more diversity in terms of skillsets and prerequisites. Having individuals conduct security force assistance and foreign internal defense who are more special operations forces focused, and therefore, focus on the more direct combat operation or strictly combative mission, deprives the host nation of all the surrounding areas of a

military mission that are important. While an expansion of the security force assistance mission across all branches and specialties would substantially bolster the ability by which the U.S. Armed Forces communicates and interacts with their foreign counterparts, the U.S. Navy, in particular, would substantially benefit from such a unit specifically for their Surface Warfare and Submarine Warfare branches and services.

Changing Tides in the South China Sea

The U.S. Armed Forces has, for the past twenty years, been consumed by asymmetric warfare. Counterterror operations, direct action missions, and counterinsurgency practices became the standard in both the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and throughout the Global War on Terrorism. In the very publicized awakening both the public and government went through following the 2021 pull out of Afghanistan, the United States has aimed to rework their entire military strategy in order to better confront new and emerging threats.⁵

Among those emerging threats include the desires by China to become “the preeminent power in East Asia and a major power on the world stage ... convinced they can do so only at the expense of U.S. power and influence.”⁶ China’s main strategic goals include undermining “U.S. financial hegemony,” becoming a “global leader in advanced manufacturing and key emerging technologies, and field a world-class military capable of operating on a global scale.”⁷ Along with this is probably China’s most significant and important geopolitical desire: the reunification

⁵ Lee Hudson, “The Biggest Threat to the U.S. Aren’t What You Think,” *Politico*, Axel Springer SE, published 14 December 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/12/14/new-national-security-threats-pentagon-00071052>.

⁶ Vera Bergengruen, “China’s Ambitions, Russia’s Nukes, and TikTok: Spy Chiefs Talk Biggest U.S. Security Threats,” *Time*, Time USA, LLC, published 08 March 2023, <https://time.com/6261094/china-russia-tiktok-top-threats-to-us/>.

⁷ Peter Mattis, “A Thorough Explanation of China’s Long-Term Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, Metamorphic Media LLC, published 17 August 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/a-thorough-explanation-of-chinas-long-term-strategy/>.

of China with Taiwan. This has long been a desire by China, to reclaim what they view as their rightful people and territory.⁸ The rhetoric and language indicating this has been growing in recent years.⁹

Many academics and experts on China have begun raising the alarm on China using military power to try and reclaim Taiwan in 2023.¹⁰ The U.S. Intelligence Community's Annual Threat Assessment, released in February of 2023, also identified Chinese control and superiority over Taiwan and the South China Sea as a key area to watch out for. The Intelligence Community indicates that "Beijing will continue to apply pressure and possibly offer inducements for Taiwan to move toward unification and will react to what it views as increased U.S.–Taiwan engagement," which is likely China building upon their actions in 2022, which may "include more Taiwan Strait centerline crossings or missile overflights of Taiwan."¹¹

Looking not at a takeover of Taiwan, but simply considering the potential of an invasion of the island nation by China, Taiwan's individual economy would be devastated, and their semiconductor production halted.¹² This poses problems for societies across the globe, and would likely be a "catastrophic blow to the global economy" with no country being able to "shield itself from the repercussions of a war with Taiwan."¹³ America itself would be incredibly

⁸ "China and Taiwan: A really simple guide," *BBC News*, British Broadcasting Corporation, published 06 April 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-59900139>.

⁹ Rhoda Kwan, "Xi Jinping vows to oppose Taiwan 'pro-independence' influences as a third term begins," *The Guardian*, Guardian Media Group, published 13 March 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/13/xi-jinping-taiwan-independence-china-parliament-national-peoples-congress>.

¹⁰ Jose Caballero, "China: why Beijing has decided this is the year to 'unify' with Taiwan," *The Conversation US*, The Conversation US, Inc., published 24 February 2023, <https://theconversation.com/china-why-beijing-has-decided-this-is-the-year-to-unify-with-taiwan-199726>.

¹¹ United States Intelligence Community, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, D.C.: 06 February 2023), pg. 06, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2023-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

¹² Jacob Zinkula & Jake Epstein, "A Chinese invasion of Taiwan is a real and dangerous possibility that could wreck armies and ruin the global economy worse than the 1929 stock market crash," *Business Insider*, Insider, Inc., published 29 January 2023, <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-would-happen-china-invades-taiwan-economy-military-politics-2023-1>.

¹³ Patrick Wintour, "If China invaded it would destroy world trade, says James Cleverly," *The Guardian*, Guardian Media Group, published 25 April 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/25/if-china-invaded-taiwan-it-would-destroy-world-trade-says-james-cleverly>.

disabled, not only from an economic standpoint, but militarily.¹⁴ A report from the *Center for Strategic and International Studies* indicates that the United States Navy would suffer heavy losses in defending Taiwan, despite likely winning the conflict and defeating the Chinese threat.¹⁵ Any defense of Taiwan or defeat of China will be largely conducted and determined on the sea, not on the ground or in the air. Some well-informed scholars on the subject have even identified submarine warfare as playing a key role in any potential conflict with China.¹⁶ Furthermore, while the United States would likely play a substantial role, the Taiwanese Navy would be the main force to directly counter China and defeat any naval campaign waged by the Chinese.

As such, it is beneficial to look at how strong and effective Taiwan's Navy is. According to an October 2022 issue of the magazine, *The Week*, Taiwan's military, overall, is outnumbered by the Chinese quite strongly, with Taiwan having 170,000 active-duty troops (and another 1.5 million in reserves) compared to China's nearly 2 million on active-duty.¹⁷ Taiwan also has had a

¹⁴ Sascha Brodsky, "How America Would Be Screwed if China Invades Taiwan," *The Daily Beast*, The Daily Beast Company LLC, published 29 January 2023, updated 30 January 2023, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-america-would-be-screwed-if-china-invades-taiwan>.

¹⁵ Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, & Eric Heginbotham, "The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, published January 2023, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/230109_Cancian_FirstBattle_NextWar.pdf?VersionId=WdEUwJYWiySMPir3ivhFolxC_gZQuSOQ.

¹⁶ Mike Sweeney, "Submarines Will Reign in a War with China," *Proceedings* vol. 149 no. 03 (March 2023), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/march/submarines-will-reign-war-china>; David Axe, "The U.S. Navy Submarine Force Could Sink The Chinese Fleet And Save Taiwan, But At The Cost Of A Quarter Of Its Boats," *Forbes*, Forbes Media LLC, published 10 January 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2023/01/10/the-us-navy-submarine-force-could-sink-the-chinese-fleet-and-save-taiwan-but-at-the-cost-of-half-its-boats/?sh=6b2352c43c36>.

¹⁷ Chas Newkey-Burden, "How strong are Taiwan's military defenses?," *The Week*, Future plc, published 28 October 2022, <https://www.theweek.co.uk/news/world-news/china/958331/how-strong-are-taiwans-military-defences>.

mandatory conscription plan in place, which was extended in late December of 2022 from four months to twelve months, and has also increased their national defense budget for 2023 by 15% from 2022.¹⁸

From a naval standpoint, China has the largest naval force in the world and would be able to deploy two aircraft carriers “32 destroyers and 48 frigates . . . nine nuclear attack and six ballistic missile submarines” against Taiwan during an invasion, while Taiwan has only four destroyers, twenty-two frigates, and “two diesel attack submarines.”¹⁹ This also does not account for China’s total arsenal of seacraft and other naval vehicles at their disposal, which has been substantially modernized since 2012.²⁰ While the number of military forces and equipment does not necessarily mean success on the battlefield, in naval conflicts the force with the greater amount of seacraft or naval power overcomes the other, historically.²¹

However, with proper training and strategic assistance, Taiwan could be able to heavily counteract a Chinese offensive. By all accounts, the United States and Taiwan (alongside their allies in the UK, Australia, Japan, and South Korea) would deal a military defeat to China, capturing, wounding, or killing hundreds of thousands of their troops, decimating their Navy, and soundly crippling their air forces.²² But, to say that the U.S. and Taiwan would emerge unscathed or better off in a military or economic sense would be incorrect. Conflict would not

¹⁸ Chad De Guzman, “Taiwan Is Extending Conscription. Here’s How Its Military Compares to Other Countries,” *Time*, Time USA, LLC, published 06 January 2023, <https://time.com/6245036/taiwan-conscription-military-comparison/>.

¹⁹ James Bickerton, “How Taiwan’s Military Power Compares to China,” *Newsweek*, Newsweek Inc., published 04 August 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/how-taiwans-military-power-compares-china-war-nancy-pelosi-1730795>.

²⁰ “How is China Modernizing its Navy?,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, published 17 December 2018, [https://www.businessinsider.com/pentagon-charts-show-chinas-military-advantage-over-taiwan-2022-1](https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-china-modernizing-its-navy-0#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20Congressional%20Research%20Service,comprised%20296%20vessels%20in%202021; Benjamin Brimelow, “New Pentagon charts lay out China’s growing military advantage over Taiwan,” <i>Business Insider</i>, Insider, Inc., published 18 January 2022, <a href=).

²¹ CPT Sam J. Tangredi, “Bigger Fleets Win,” *Proceedings* vol. 149 no. 01 (January 2023), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/january/bigger-fleets-win>.

²² De Guzman, “Taiwan Is Extending Conscription. Here’s How Its Military Compares to Other Countries,” *Time*.

completely destroy either country, but it would be a costly, if highly necessary, conflict. In order to accomplish this, a robust and strong navy would be essential to the defense of Taiwan. Given this is a largely seaborne conflict, many of the ground combat tactics seen with security force assistance would be impracticable. A security force assistance policy with a focus on surface and submarine warfare will be most helpful and beneficial in defending Taiwan and defeating China.

Security Force Assistance in the United States Navy's Submarine and Surface Corps

Surface warfare and submarine warfare will take on a new role and meaning in the coming years and decades, and nowhere more substantially than in the South China Sea. As such, a new unit of security force advisors, specializing in surface warfare and submarine warfare operations, is imperative in the development of a defense against Taiwan. This unit would be comprised of the best strategists in naval warfare, expert trainers and tacticians of surface and submarine warfare, and individuals who have cultural experience and knowledge of their specific geographical region. Surface Warfare Officers, Submarine Warfare Officers, Military Intelligence Officers, and others with skillsets ranging from logistics to telecommunications would be prime individuals to fill the ranks of a security force unit. These individuals would integrate themselves within their host nation's specific defense ministry or department, naval command, or specific host nation fleets, groups, and task forces. They would take a hands-on approach, subjecting the host nation to intense academic and classroom instruction, guiding junior and senior commissioned officers through historical analyses on surface warfare, creating war gaming exercises, and surveilling these officers during training exercises and simulations. These naval advisors would also help implement policies which would benefit the host nation's defense framework, as well as improve the host nation's

intelligence gathering and provision on enemy adversaries. Finally, the advisors would suggest methods that can improve the host nation's strategy and capabilities at sea.

Some of this is likely already being done and performed by certain military attachés stationed at embassies around the globe, however, this is performed on a much-limited scale. Some embassies have only one attaché stationed in their area and that station is responsible for an entire country's operations. As well, their duties pertain to more than purely military stability, including serving as the main military advisor to the U.S. Ambassador and State Department staff and gathering intelligence on geopolitical developments on regional political-military events. My argument would call for the creation of a 15-20-man force which would explicitly work with the host nation military on improving their sea force and naval capabilities. Furthermore, they would be under the ultimate and primary control of the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of the Navy rather than being coordinated through the Defense Intelligence Agency's Defense Attaché System or somehow being subordinate to the U.S. Department of State. Their role would be exclusively military and focused on the improvement of the host nation's naval force. In Taiwan's case, for example, this would be highly beneficial. It is well documented that the U.S. Navy's submarine warfare training programs and systems have made for an incredibly effective military force.²³ The Navy has made substantial reforms and adjustments to their surface warfare programs with an emphasis on "high-quality training and mentoring."²⁴

²³ Megan Eckstein, "Better weapons, complex training bolster US submarine force," *DefenseNews*, Sightline Media Group, published 03 November 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2022/11/03/better-weapons-complex-training-bolster-us-submarine-force/>.

²⁴ Megan Eckstein, "Surface warfare boss unveils strategy to create 'more ready ships'; better trained sailors," *DefenseNews*, Sightline Media Group, published 11 January 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/surface-navy-association/2022/01/11/surface-warfare-boss-unveils-strategy-to-create-more-ready-ships-better-trained-sailors/>.

Furthermore, units that specialize in training military forces could be beneficial to allied nation states beyond Taiwan, such as Australia, South Korea, and Japan. All would benefit from such a unit and could greatly develop their militaries to better counter China in the South China Sea. Expanding such a program to the navies of Europe and North America, primarily the navies of Sweden, Canada, Denmark, Finland, and others, would be of immense benefit in countering China in the Arctic Circle, another area of interest to global security, economic, and scientific goals. Not only would such a unit would be a fantastic way of strengthening the bonds between friendly, allied navies (accomplishing political and foreign policy goals for the United States), but such a unit could also function as an effective deterrent against Chinese incursion.

Provided, it became public knowledge that Taiwanese naval forces were being trained, it could be a way to preempt any threatening action or give the Chinese a moment's pause. The U.S. Navy has recognized the importance of providing training and expert advice to military forces in Taiwan as, in April of 2023, "Japanese and South Korean naval commanders toured a US ballistic missile submarine off Guam" as "an example of how the US had advanced a trilateral relationship [and] intended to be resolute against threats that challenge regional stability."²⁵ This is not to say that the U.S. Navy or Department of Defense is looking at developing a security force assistance unit as described, but it does indicate they recognize the importance of having their own sailors and officers in foreign countries being embattled against a common enemy. A naval security force assistance unit explicitly designed to improve Taiwan's submarine and surface warfare corps, would be a logical next step, and likely prove to be incredibly useful, both as a method of warfighting and deterring an armed seaborne conflict.

²⁵ Minnie Chan, "Japanese, South Korean commanders tour US Navy nuclear sub in military 'first'," *South China Morning Post*, Alibaba Group, published 05 May 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3219571/japanese-south-korean-commanders-tour-us-sub-military-first>.

Conclusion

The skills, knowledge, and capabilities learned, understood, and crafted by U.S. Navy officers in the surface and submarine warfare branches remain among the best in the world. They have access to the most stringent and thorough primary and continuing training and education; they maintain high entry educational standards; they pride themselves on being among the best of their class; they train in a variety of skills and departments to be able to best control and lead a frigate, destroyer, or aircraft carrier. Exporting this knowledge and capabilities to other, friendly navies in need of support would be of immense assistance to allied forces. The Security Force Assistance Brigades of the U.S. Army have found immense success in Indo-Pacific Asia and the Middle East, being recognized as such by practitioners, military scholars, and senior commanders alike.²⁶

Further research and analysis on how well a permanent, naval-oriented security force assistance unit would benefit host nations on the cusp, or verge of geopolitical crises, like the rising tensions in the South China Sea, is necessary before implementing such a policy clearly. Any kind of policy focusing on this would need to be bolstered by statistical analysis, directly related experience of security force assistance policy, and insider understanding of the security force assistance brigades currently in use by the U.S. Army. Ensuring that such a policy would be effective is a must before moving forward.

²⁶ Renanah Miles Joyce, Max Margulies, & Tucker Chase, "The Future of U.S. Security Force Assistance," *Modern War Institute*, U.S. Military Academy at West Point, U.S. Department of Defense, published 23 November 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/the-future-of-us-security-force-assistance/>; John T. Pelham IV, "Security Force Assistance Brigades and US Indo-Pacific Command Multi-domain Competition," *Parameters* vol. 52 no. 04 (2022), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3186&context=parameters>; C. Todd Lopez, "Success of First SFAB in Afghanistan Proves 'Army Got it Right,' Commander Says," *Defense.gov*, U.S. Department of Defense, published 08 May 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1842220/success-of-first-sfab-in-afghanistan-proves-army-got-it-right-commander-says/>.

With proper and appropriate research, the United States Navy and U.S. Department of Defense could find a new way in which to counter the Chinese military overall, and the Chinese Navy specifically, while also working to support Taiwan's military and naval forces especially. Not only would such a strategy benefit the Taiwanese, but other regional nations allied to the United States who hold a national interest in such military advising operations could also utilize the program in accordance with their needs.