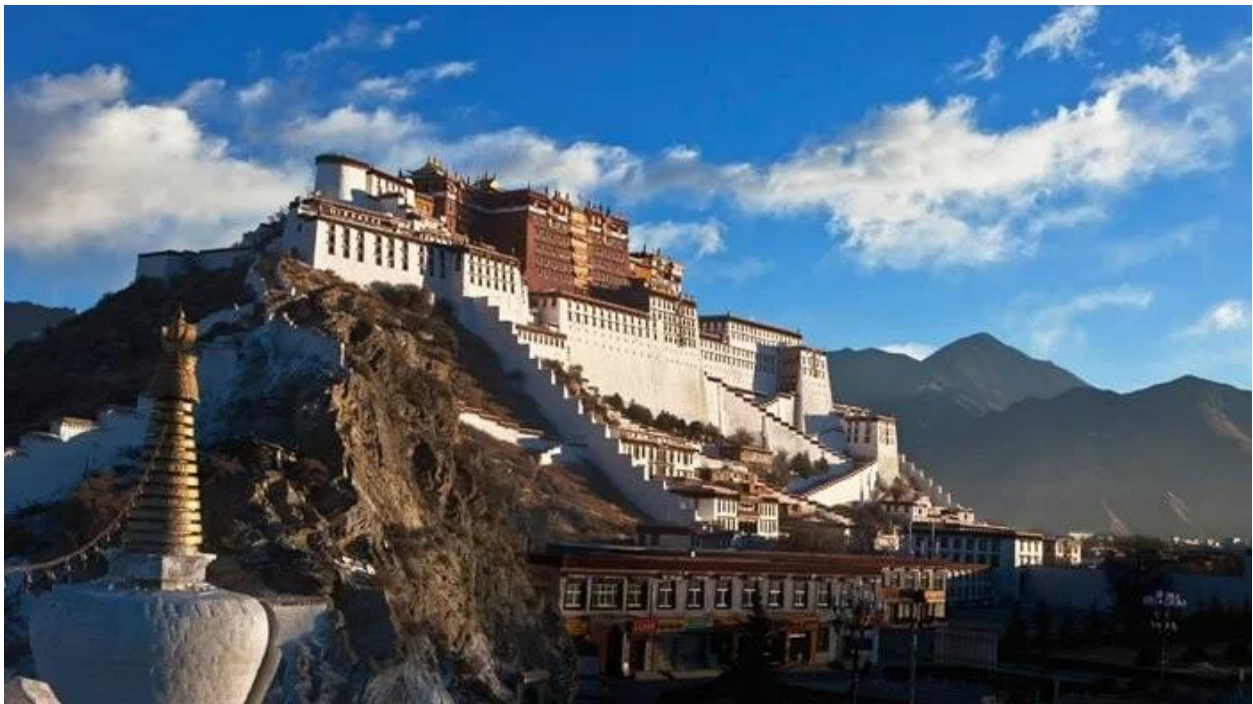




## Chinese Power Projection: How the Invasion of Tibet relates to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Taiwan

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**E**ver since the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the reign of Mao Zedong in 1949 power projection and the annexation of territory has been the primary objective for China. Today this power projection spans the Indo-Pacific region in the East and South China Seas, the intent being to annex Taiwan under PRC control, and influence the continent of Africa as well. This power projection is possible since the PRC is one of the dominant powers in the region. Yet the PRC had to first annex the land that now makes up the current nation after their civil war. After the civil war in China ended, the next territory that was annexed was Tibet. This annexation is a prime case study that can be used to better understand the situation between China and Taiwan today. The intent is to discuss similarities and differences between the situation with Tibet and Taiwan, and draw conclusions

on what we may see the PRC do in the future when potentially invading Taiwan.

### **A Brief History: Tibet and China**

The issues between China and Tibet begin a few decades before 1949. After Chinese revolutionaries overthrew the last imperial dynasty the Qing, in 1912 these revolutionaries proclaimed the Republic of China (ROC). One year later in 1913, Tibet also proclaimed its independence as well. The proclamation of independence of the ROC and Tibet is the beginning of the issue. Then in 1914 at the Simla Convention, where representatives from Great Britain, China and Tibet attended, the border between Tibet and British India was cemented.<sup>i</sup> Tibet and Great Britain had signed the agreement but China refrained from signing since they wanted to claim control over Tibet. Even though China at the time did not agree with the sovereignty of Tibet, the ROC was pre-occupied with issues in their own territory that lead to a civil war. Since the civil war was raging in the ROC, the independence of Tibet stood until 1949.<sup>ii</sup>

Once the civil war ended, with Mao Zedong leading the now Peoples Republic of China (PRC) and Chiang Kai-shek defeated and fleeing to Formosa (Taiwan), Mao could then turn his focus to Tibet once more. Mao originally was open to either annexing Tibet peacefully with the acceptance of the Three-Terms Agreement, or forcefully using the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA). The terms of the agreement sent in 1950 were for Tibet to accept itself as being part of China, allow Chinese troops to care for the defense of Tibet and for the government of China to control Tibet's foreign and trade relationships.<sup>iii</sup> The government of Tibet, in Lhasa, did not agree to these terms and attempted to stall the response to China so they could try in gaining support from the United States and Great Britain to assist them. Unfortunately, the call for allies was too late and China eventually grew impatient and invaded Tibet on 6 October 1950.

At the start of the conflict in the Battle of Chamdo, the vast differences between the Tibetan Military and PLA were clear. The Tibetan Military consisted of 8,500 troops while the PLA consisted of 40,000 troops.<sup>iv</sup> The PLA was five times larger than the Tibetan Military and was equipped with Soviet equipment and machines. Furthermore, the PLA was better trained and battle hardened. Coming from the civil war in China the PLA had combat experience while the Tibetan Military was under equipped and poorly trained. Clearly the Tibetan Military was outmatched.



Cold War Documentaries “How China Annex Tibet” YouTube, (June 18, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enQuH7TVw7Q>.

Although the PLA was a superior force, they still used specific tactics to ensure the swift defeat of their adversary. First of these tactics was surprise, even though there was a buildup of Chinese forces on the border, the actual start of the invasion was still a surprise and forced the Tibetan Military to react. Second being that the Chinese strategy was to encircle and cut off Chamdo so they had no other choice but to surrender. The PLA was able to surround Chamdo since they had the numerical advantage as well. All of this in mind there was another factor that played into the swift defeat of the Tibetan Military, which was a lack of communications capability. By the time Lhasa knew of the invasion it was too late to send reinforcements or to attempt to fend off the Chinese invasion.

As the Chinese forces were encircling Lhasa, the Tibetan government was beginning to consider surrender and acceptance of the three-point agreement with some stipulations. But instead, there was one last effort to bring support for Tibet, which was a call on the United Nations (UN). Since Tibet was not already a member of the UN, a member had to bring the issue of the Chinese invasion into Tibet to the General Assembly (GA). El Salvador supported the issues and brought it to the GA, and at first India supported Tibet, as did the U.S. and Great Britain, following the path of India. That was until China agreed to build a trade relationship with India if China had control of Tibet.<sup>v</sup> This swayed India’s stance and instead China had the support of the GA. Since the

UN and the Security Council did not react and permitted this invasion into Tibet there were no more options left but to accept the Chinese agreement.

In 1951 the Tibetan representatives re-entered negotiations with China and instead of the original three-point agreement, they were forced to accept the 17-Point Agreement also known as “The Agreement of the Central People’s Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet.” To summarize the 17-Point Agreement, the agreement solidified China’s control over Tibet, the Tibetan military was to be absorbed by the PLA and the Chinese government would control all external affairs for Tibet.<sup>vi</sup> Additionally, the power and position of the Dalai Lama would remain as is in 1951, and the religious freedom of the people in Tibet would be protected. Finally, the PLA forces in Tibet would set up a military headquarters and to the greatest extent not disturb the living situation of the people. Of course, this then led to a decade later in 1959 the Tibetan resistance against the Chinese government.

Overall, there are multiple similarities that can be drawn from the invasion of Tibet in 1950 and what can be assessed for the invasion of Taiwan in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This comes with the understanding and assumption that China will invade Taiwan in the near future based on reporting from President Xi Jinping’s plan for reunification of China.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Connections to Taiwan Today**

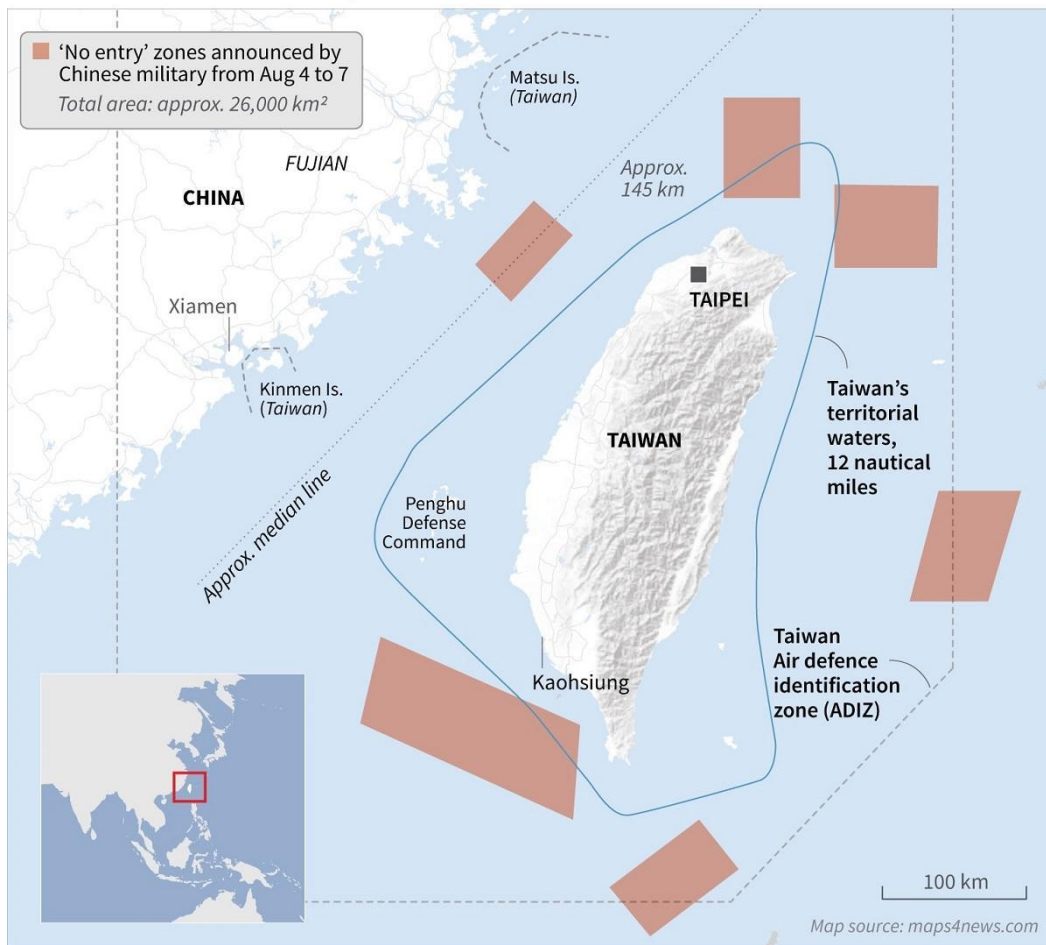
Aside from Tibet being an invasion, and Taiwan being an invasion plan, there are multiple similarities between the two situations. During the annexation of Tibet, China used propaganda claiming that the reunification was actually a “liberation”, asserting that China was setting the people of Tibet free from some unidentified oppression. Another similarity is that China has the element of surprise once again. Although during the invasion of Tibet the build-up of forces on the border was known, the Tibetan Military still did not know the exact day or time that the PLA would cross the border and invade. It is the same situation in the East China Sea: even though the United States and its allies can identify when there is a build of logistics, naval vessels and troops on the east coast of China, the exact timing is still unknown. Therefore, the coalition to support Taiwan has to react whenever the time comes.

Regarding tactics, the Tibet experience suggests that China will attempt during the first phase of the invasion of Taiwan to surround the island. Like the PLA did when invading Tibet, surrounding Taiwan will force the Taiwanese military to engage on all sides of the island and pressure the government immediately. Not only will the military be pressured but the Taiwanese economy will be stressed as well.<sup>viii</sup> With a blockade around the island, U.S. and coalition aid will be blocked, exports and imports will cease and an aerial blockade will

completely stop any resources from making it into Taiwan. Not only can China place a blockade around Taiwan but the Chinese military at large is the largest military in the world. China currently has a force of 2.8 million members to include active military and reserve.<sup>ix</sup> The PLA is broken out into ground forces, air forces, rocket forces, naval and special forces, and the sheer number of troops under the military is staggering in comparison to the coalition partners individually. Thus, in order to match the might of the Chinese military by numbers, Taiwan must have the entire coalition on their side to include but not limited to the United States, Japan, Australia, Great Britain, South Korea, and India.

### Areas of Chinese military exercises

A series of drills in waters around Taiwan would include “long-range live ammunition shooting” in the Taiwan Strait: Chinese military



Source: MSA/OAC



GMA News Online “US must prepare now for China invasion of Taiwan” GMA News Online (October 2022), <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/world/848698/us-must-prepare-now-for-china-invasion-of-taiwan-admiral/story/>.

The fact that Taiwan has nations pledged to protect them in the event of the Chinese invasion is something that Tibet did not have. The allies providing military technology, training and collective defense in support of Taiwan, that if Tibet had the same support in 1949, who knows what western China would look like today. But it is clear that in order for Taiwan to survive a Chinese invasion, having allies that are willing to start and continue a war with China is key.

### **Impacts For All Indo-Pacific Nations**

Although there are many allies for Taiwan such as India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Australia, U.S., Japan, and South Korea, not all nations have the same capabilities. The coalition brings numbers but not overall capabilities. By this meaning that other nations that will oppose China each of them brings a force but a different quality and with different technological levels. This is a significant limitation to the coalition previously stated. China has the largest military in the world that is also equally supplied and trained, while the coalition facing off against the behemoth which is the PLA, work with different equipment, tactics, communications, training, and capabilities. In terms of centralized command and common Training, Tactics and Procedures (TTPs) the advantage leans in favor of the PLA. In order to rebalance the scale, all coalition players must continue the exercises that occur in the Pacific, but also practice with severe limitations such as degraded GPS, communications and logistics support. In a real-world war, the capabilities that we take for granted could be degraded or completely denied.

Lastly, one of the significant faults on Tibet during 1949 is that the Tibetans attempted to advance and build new capabilities for their military too late before the invasion occurred. This lesson can be carried into today's fight, so that all players in the coalition such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and India that do not have the most up to date weaponry or communication system must upgrade and develop military technology that can stand up to China's advanced systems. The lack in technological capability by the other nations then only provide numbers that may not last long in a stalemate or long-term war. Agreements such as the Australian, United Kingdom and United States Agreement (AUKUS) should be spread to the other militaries in the region so that all players can face off against Chinese abilities sufficiently.

In light of this information, the similarities between the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 and the oncoming invasion of Taiwan in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are daunting. The history of the conflicts is alike, as are the potential diplomatic agreements. Although more importantly, the military tactics that can be drawn from the Tibet situation to the Taiwan invasion should be used to identify gaps in the coalitions ability to react to the Chinese invasion. The key to a



successful reaction in the near future is to be prepared, across each military and to be swift in the response before Taiwan is cut off from the world and is forced into a corner.

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<sup>v</sup> Cold War Documentaries.

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