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Abrams Under the White Sun: New American-Made Tanks for Taiwan

By: Grant T. Willis and Brendan H.J. Donnelly | January 18th, 2025



Figure 1: A Taiwanese M1A2T Abrams main battle tank is unloaded in Taipei on Dec. 15, 2024. (Taiwan Military News Agency).

In December 2024, four significant events took place between Taiwan (aka. The Republic of China) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). First, Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te took his first overseas trip in the Indo-Pacific visiting Palau, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Hawaii and Guam.¹ Likely in response to this trip, the PRC deployed 90 People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels and Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) vessels, accompanied by 47-53 aircraft in the East and South China Seas to conduct their largest naval exercise since 1996.² This exercise simulated blocking foreign intervention in the First Island Chain, and came unannounced days after President Lai's trip. The PRC likely intends to keep Taiwan and President Lai on their guard, demonstrating the PLA's ability to launch large scale operations around Taiwan anytime. As this exercise, tensions between CCG vessels in the South China Sea and the previous Joint Sword 2024A & B taking place in May and October of 2024, increase pressure on Taiwan, the Taiwanese Presidential office hosted their own exercise concerned with defending the island against the PRC. Also in December, dozens of central and local government agencies as well as civil groups participated in a three-hour long tabletop exercise that simulated high

¹ Brian Hioe, "China Launches New Military Drills Around Taiwan Following Lai's First Overseas Trip", *The Diplomat*, (December 13, 2024), <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/china-launches-new-military-drills-around-taiwan-following-lais-first-overseas-trip/>.

² Matthew Sperzel, Daniel Shats, Alison O'Neil, et al., "China Taiwan Weekly Update, December 12, 2024", *Institute for the Study of War*, (December 12, 2024), <https://understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/china-taiwan-weekly-update-december-12-2024>.

intensity conflict with China and how to respond when the island is “on the verge of conflict” with China.³

Taiwan must study defensive methods against the PRC as the PLA and CCG continue to “normalize” their presence in the South and East China Seas, and cross into Taiwanese controlled territory.⁴ Further, PRC President Xi Jinping re-established the goals for China in his 2024 New Years message, “China will surely be reunified, and all Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait should be bound by a common sense of purpose and share in the glory of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”, pointing to the Chinese goals of rejuvenation which ultimately includes the claimed “reunification” with Taiwan.⁵ Clearly, the PRC is working to maintain a constant pressure on Taiwan as the current administration seeks more “separatist” activities, and Taiwan also prepares its military, government and society for the threat of a PRC emergency.

New Armor Arrives in Taipei

As Taiwan continues to prepare its military for a PRC emergency, on December 15, 2024, Taipei received its first delivery of 38 American M1A2T Abrams main battle tanks, with a total of 108 to be sent to Taiwan by 2026.

³ Yimou Lee, “In a first, Taiwan’s Presidential Office Runs tabletop simulation on a China Emergency”, *Reuters*, (December 26, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/first-taiwans-presidential-office-runs-war-games-simulate-china-emergency-2024-12-26/>.

⁴ Reuters, “Xi Says no one can stop China’s ‘reunification’ with Taiwan”, *Reuters*, (December 31, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/xi-says-no-one-can-stop-chinas-reunification-with-taiwan-2024-12-31/>.

⁵ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, “Full Text of President Xi Jinping’s 2024 New Year Message” *Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America*, (December 31, 2024), http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202312/t20231231_11215608.htm.

The new tanks are designated “T” for Taiwan and mark a new generational leap forward in the ROC armored corps. The majority of Taiwan’s armored force has always been U.S. made but were upgraded versions of older M60 or M48 main battle tanks which were mostly used during the Cold War era.⁶ These Abrams variants are customized M1A2 SEPv2s and will be the first new tanks Taiwan has acquired in almost 25 years. In a piece for *Defense News*, a Taiwan Defense analyst, Chen Kuoming commented that the new batch of weapons were intended to defend the island’s capital, Taipei, outfitting two new armored brigades based in Linkou, Taipei and Hukou, Hsinchu. Chen continued by pointing out that although powerful pieces of armor, 108 Abrams are insufficient to replace the total force of armored vehicles in Taiwan’s Army and cannot cover southern and central Taiwan without further shipments. The Abrams are seen as a final line of defense for the capital in the event of a Communist Chinese invasion of the democratic island. Chen offered, “From the Russia-Ukraine war, we’ve seen drones and loitering munitions attacking tanks”.⁷ The need to provide protection to these precious new tanks from such an attack is obvious. Taiwan also received its first installment of U.S. made HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System) units complete with AGM-140 ATACMS (Army Tactical Missile System) long range missiles assigned to

⁶ Wu Che-yu, and William Hetherington, “First Batch of M1A2 Tanks Arrive in Taipei - Taipei Times.” *Taipei Times*, (December 16, 2024), <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2024/12/16/2003828564>.

⁷ Ibid.

Taichung on the west central coast's 58th Artillery Command. These units have a range of 186 miles, placing the Chinese mainland at risk.⁸



Figure 2: AGM-140 ATACMS missiles on display in front of a HIMARS launch vehicle

This arms package, originally agreed to by President Donald Trump's administration in 2019 will see projected fulfillment by 2026. According to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), "The new tanks will strengthen coastal defense capabilities and help to further modernize Taiwan's aging tank fleet. The tanks will also help to expand interoperability with the United States and several partners. The Abrams tanks' defense capabilities will be particularly

⁸ Arthur, Gordon, "Taiwan Gets US Abrams Tanks, Hardening Final Defenses in an Invasion." *Defense News*, (December 20, 2024), <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2024/12/20/taiwan-gets-us-abrams-tanks-hardening-final-defenses-in-an-invasion/>.

effective against China's emerging Type 05 amphibious fighting vehicles [...]".⁹ The PRC responded, "[...] denying that Taiwan had its own Ministry of National Defense and urging the United States to abide to the one-China principle, which states that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and the PRC is the sole legitimate government of that China."¹⁰ The United States does not recognize the one-China principle but instead maintains a "one-China policy", where the PRC is the "sole legal government of China", but the United States does not recognize Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan.¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Lin Jian highlighted the U.S.-PRC 1982 Joint Communique during the normalization of relations, which the PRC claims preclude the US from selling arms to Taiwan. The U.S. and PRC did not settle the question of arms sales to Taiwan during negotiations regarding the normalization of relations, and the United States' policy dictates that its arms sales to Taiwan depend on the PRC's commitment to a peaceful resolution of its differences with Taiwan. The PRC's response is consistent with its past condemnations of U.S. weapon shipments to Taiwan, such as the approval of a

⁹ Matthew Sperzel, Daniel Shats, Alison O'Neil, et al., "China-Taiwan Weekly Update, December 20, 2024." *Institute for the Study of War*, (December 20, 2024), <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/chna-taiwan-weekly-update-december-20-2024>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Michael J. Green and Bonnie S. Glaser, "What is the U.S. 'One China' Policy and Why does it Matter?", *Center for Strategic International Studies*, (January 13, 2017), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-us-one-china-policy-and-why-does-it-matter>.

\$2 billion weapons agreement in late October. Such statements aim to delegitimize both the ROC government and U.S. support for the ROC.”¹²



Figure 3: PLA Type 99 main battle tanks on parade in Tiananmen Square- BBC

Island Armored Warfare in the Pacific: A Historical Context

During World War II, Imperial Japan had never been known as a mainstay in the development of armored doctrine. Compared to its Axis Ally in Nazi Germany, Japan did not place emphasis on its armored corps to ever rival the exploits of expert panzer practitioners like Rommel, Guderian, or Manstein. The primary motivation for any improvement to Japanese Tanks and armored

¹² Matthew Sperzel, Daniel Shats, Alison O’Neil, et al., “China-Taiwan Weekly Update, December 20, 2024.” *Institute for the Study of War*, (December 20, 2024), <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/china-taiwan-weekly-update-december-20-2024>.

doctrine was due to a stunning defeat for Japanese forces in 1939 at Khalkhin Gol by Soviet Far East Forces commanded by Georgy Zhukov.¹³

As World War II in the Indo-Pacific expanded, the American led Allied counter offensives across the south and central pacific converged upon Japan's pacific defense perimeter, clashes between American and Japanese tanks became more frequent and demonstrative of their value in island warfare. The mismanagement of American armored formations in the defense of the Philippines from 1941-42 showcased the need for improvement in the use of mobile firepower in what many observe as a light infantry contest in the Pacific.

¹³ Steven J. Zaloga, and Felipe Rodríguez. *Tanks in the Philippines 1944-45 the biggest armored clashes of the Pacific War*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2024. Pg 4.



Figure 4: Soviet Officers and supporting BT series tanks of the 149th Rifle Regiment before an armored offensive against the Japanese 6th Army at the nearly 5-month long border war in Mongolia between the Soviet Union and Imperial Japan in 1939

By 1944-45, the Battles in the Marianas and General Douglas MacArthur's liberation of the Philippines saw some of the largest engagements between American and Japanese armor. In Saipan, the larger size of the island and nature of the terrain allowed significant armored action by both sides. For the defense of the Marianas, Japan committed the 9th Tank Regiment as well as attached light armored units under the Imperial Navy's Special Naval Landing Forces (SNLF) to provide a mobile armored component to the garrisons at Saipan, Tinian, and Guam. In Saipan, the U.S. 2nd and 4th Marine Divisions, along with the Army's 27th Infantry Division fought a series of bitter battles to secure the island. The Americans on Saipan committed both Army

and Marine Tank battalions in mass to not only fight off fanatical Banzai charges and dug in infantry and artillery positions but faced a series of assaults from elements of the Imperial 9th Tank Regiment and the SNLF amphibious light tanks. The Japanese armor encompassed both medium and light tanks such as the type 97 Shinhoto Chi-Ha with an upgraded 47mm main gun or the type 95 Ha-Go respectively. Although the newer Type 97 Shinhoto were better equipped, they could hardly stand up against the American M5A1 Stuart light tank let alone have a chance of penetrating the frontal armor of an M4 Sherman medium tank. With the 9th Tank Regiment split up into smaller units amongst the Marianas, their limited firepower could not be concentrated. Only the 3rd, 5th, and 6th Tank companies were stationed on Saipan alongside 9 SNLF light tanks. The American Armored historian Steven Zaloga describes Saipan's tank combat:

“On the night of 15 June, a Japanese SNLF raiding party, supported by several Type 2 Ka-mi amphibious tanks, landed near Garapan on the left flank of the northern beaches. The Marines called in naval star shell illumination, and the Type 2s soon fell victim to Marine bazookas and tank guns. This was the first wide scale use of bazookas in the Pacific and marked yet another disadvantage faced by the Japanese tankers. At dawn, the Japanese SNLF Type 95 Ha-Go company and the 4th Co., 9th Tank Regiment attacked the beachhead with supporting infantry.

They were devastated by tank fire from the two Marine battalions. On 16 June, the Army's 27th Division landed, supported by Co. B (M4A2) and Co. D (M5A1) of the 762nd Tank Battalion, and Co. D (M5A1) of the 766th Tank Battalion. The steady progress of U.S. forces led Vice-Admiral Nagumo to order Army garrison commander Lt. Gen. Saito, to launch an all-out counterattack on the night of 16-17 June. Spearheading the attack were 44 tanks of Col Hideki Goto's 9th Tank Regiment. Marines could hear the Japanese tank engines while they were loaded with troops from the 136th Infantry Regiment in the town of Garapan. The Marines requested tank support and received a M4A2 platoon from Co. A, 2nd Marine Tank Battalion and several M3 75mm SPM halftracks. The largest single Japanese tank attack of the Pacific war started at 0200 on the morning of 17 June. The Japanese tank attack came across open ground, and naval star shells quickly illuminated the tanks. The Marines began firing with bazooka and 37mm anti-tank guns, knocking out several. In the confusion, several Japanese tanks strayed into nearby marshes and soon became trapped. Several tanks reached Marine lines but were quickly knocked out. As the attack was crushed in a hail of gunfire, the Marine tanks and SPMs began moving into the field, attacking any surviving tanks. Only 12 Japanese tanks managed to escape the slaughter, half Ha-Go and half Chi-Has. On 24 June,

many of these survivors were lost in an unequal duel with M4A2 medium tanks of Co. C, 2nd Marine Tank Battalion near Garapan, and the rest were destroyed in scattered encounters with Army M5A1 light tanks. Saipan was a complete change from previous Pacific campaigns, since the open terrain permitted freer use of tanks. But tank losses were quite heavy to artillery and to hand-emplaced magnetic mines. Japanese mine-teams soon learned that their weapons were especially effective if carefully placed on vulnerable points of the M4A2 medium tank, such as the rear fuel tanks. The Marines soon learned that there had to be close cooperation between the tanks and infantry to defeat these tactics. By now, the Marines had found that telephones mounted on the rear of the tanks were absolutely essential to coordinate their actions with the accompanying infantry. Saipan was declared secure on 9 July 1944.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Zaloga, Steve. *Tank Battles of the Pacific War: 1941-1945*. Hong Kong: Concord Publications, 1995. Pg 6-7.



Figure 5: Destroyed and burning Japanese Type 97-kai Shinhoto Ch-Ha medium tank of the 9th Tank Regiment on Saipan 1944

General Douglas MacArthur's return to the Philippines reached its zenith when in January 1945 his 6th Army under General Walter Krueger landed the U.S. I and XIV Corps at Lingayen Gulf on Luzon. The primary objective would be to secure the massive complex of air bases centered around what was formerly Clark Field and the city and harbor facilities of Manila. To bog down the American advance, General Yamashita kept a substantial ground force on Luzon to draw the Americans into a protracted and bloody campaign designed to sap the American will to fight and delay the Allied drive towards the Japanese home islands. To assist this delaying action, Yamashita had received

the Imperial 2nd Armored Division from the China front in 1944, the only intact division sized armored formation to face the Americans in the Pacific. Under the command of Lt. Gen. Yoshiharu Iwanaka, the 2nd Armored was a fully equipped division, complete with the latest weapons and equipment the Empire could provide. Its troops were fanatically motivated and in high spirits to meet MacArthur's men when they landed on Luzon. Yamashita and Iwanaka knew full well that despite the excellent tank country provided by the Luzon central plain, the 2nd Armored would be no match in open area massed formations against American air power. The devastation effect of Allied fighter-bombers like the P-47 Thunderbolt, known fearfully by Panzergrenadiers as "Jabos", was made evident to masses of German Panzer formations in tank friendly countries in Europe and the Japanese were no stranger to this reality. Therefore, without adequate air support, the 2nd Armored Division was divided into smaller units to defend key terrain from dug-in positions into which the Americans were expected to assault. Combined with well entrenched infantry, interlocking machine gun positions, and direct fire anti-tank guns/artillery pieces, the tanks could stand as mobile pillboxes. Showing only their turrets with a 360-degree traversable field of fire, Filipino Barrios became fortresses, waiting for the Americans to have to assault them from across open ground. One such engagement took place in February 1945 at Muñoz between elements of the Imperial 6th Tank Regiment, 2nd Armored Division and 1st U.S. Corps' 20th Infantry Regiment of the 6th Infantry Division, "The Sightseers". The 6th ID engaged in bitter fighting over several days to take Muñoz, in which 1

Congressional Medal of Honor was earned. The 2nd Armored Division was a worthy opponent on paper for MacArthur. Code named “Geki” (Attack force in Japanese), the armored division possessed nearly 11,200 troopers with 1,500 vehicles of all types. Despite suffering some losses to marauding American submarines during its dangerous transit from Manchuria to the Philippines, the 2nd was largely in full strength by the time 6th Army landed at Lingayen Gulf in January 1945.¹⁵

At Muñoz alone, elements of the 20th Infantry Regiment, 6th Division alongside armored and artillery attached units destroyed the Imperial 6th Tank Regiment of the Ida detachment in bitter fighting for the Barrio against dug-in tanks providing mutual support to other entrenched infantry and supporting direct fire artillery. On top of the 6th Tank Regiment, the “Red Star” Division had destroyed a further anti-tank battalion, 3rd Tank Brigade headquarters, the 2nd Mobile Artillery Regiment, and an armored infantry battalion. The American price to pay for dislodging the Japanese positions was high, 97 killed and 303 wounded.¹⁶ The 6th Division official history states of Muñoz that, “In addition to breaking the backbone of Jap armored might in Luzon and destroying the greatest concentration of enemy armored strength ever encountered in the Pacific, the wearers of the Red Star had denied to the

¹⁵ Patrick J. Chaisson, “The Enemy Must Be Annihilated.” *Warfare History Network*, (October 21, 2024) <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/the-enemy-must-be-annihilated/>.

¹⁶ *6th Infantry Division in World War II*. Washington, D.C: Infantry Journal Press, 1947. Pg 100.

enemy in southern Luzon his last route of escape to the north. The Sightseers had won the most decisive victory of the Luzon Campaign.”¹⁷

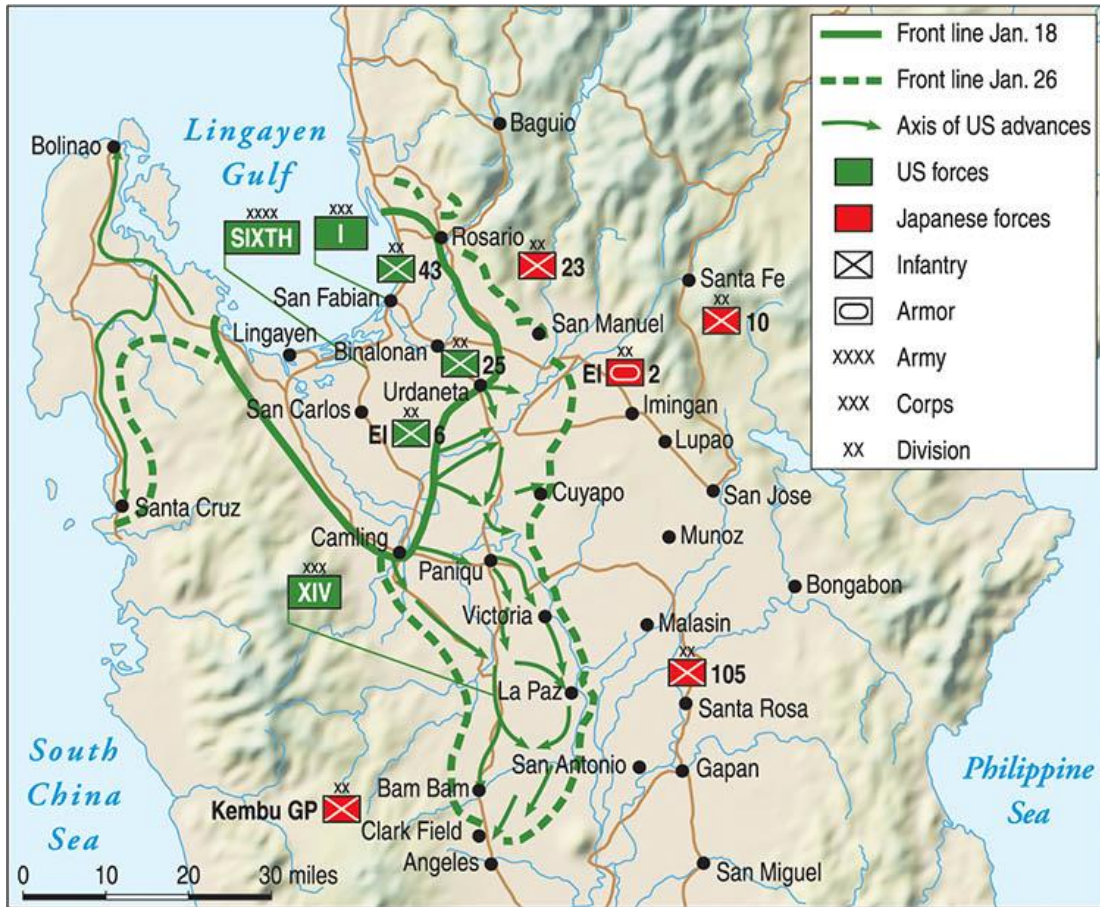


Figure 6: Map of U.S. 6th Army operations on Luzon, 1945 – Warfare History Network

More details were identified in a declassified intelligence analysis from June 1945 War Department of Japanese Tank and Anti-Tank Warfare, of the 2nd Armored Division’s performance on Luzon:

¹⁷ Ibid., Pg 100.

“The 2nd Armored Division on Luzon was the first such unit encountered by United States forces. It was anticipated that the commitment of this Japanese armored force would provide valuable material for a study of Japanese methods in the employment of massed armor and coordinated infantry-armor-artillery tactics. Actual operations, however, revealed that the Japanese commanders either did not understand the modern concept of armor employment or simply were unable to employ the armored division in accordance with promulgated principles of operation. Instead, the Japanese commanders fritter away the division in piecemeal counterattacks and immobile defenses. They never mounted an attack with more than 16 tanks at one time. The principle of mass was never employed. The inherent mobility of the tanks was not utilized but was negated by committing the tanks to fixed defensive emplacements. The greatest concentration of Japanese tanks was in San Manuel and Muñoz. Here, the armor, committed to a death stand, was dug in so that only the turrets were exposed. Emplacements had heavy adobe revetments, were under heavy foliage, and were a nucleus for all other defensive measures. Tanks were sited to cover the highways and cross-country approaches with mutually supporting fires. Close-in security of the armored pillboxes was provided by automatic weapons and infantry dug in around each

tank. Artillery, replaced in covered positions, supplemented the tanks to complete an integrated fire plan. Last resort counter attacks were launched at night once the local defense was doomed.”¹⁸



Figure 7: 6th ID infantrymen passing by knocked out Type 97 Kai-Shinhoto Chi-ha medium tanks of the 6th Tank Regiment, 2nd Armored Division outside Muñoz 1945

Lessons Learned

For Taiwan, unlike Japan in 1944-45, there are options in the use of armor concentrations against an invasion force. The M1A2T SEPv2 variant is a far much better match for PLA Armored Fighting Vehicles (AFVs) compared to the inadequate and underpowered Japanese tanks relative to their American opponents on Saipan and Luzon. With the current and future mixture of

¹⁸ *Japanese Tank and Anti-Tank Warfare Declassified*. Washington D.C.: U.S. War Department Military Intelligence Division, 1945. Pg 36-37.

armored capability, the ROC ground forces will possess a varying level of armored fighting power that can allow for a two-pronged approach to providing a hard fighting mobile armored reserve while simultaneously spreading their less powerful tanks amongst defending infantry formations to provide local mobilized fire support. The Japanese on Saipan and Luzon were forced to spread out their armor to make any impact at all against the Americans due to their lack of firepower and control of the air. For a Taiwanese defense, the contested air above by Allied air components and influx of air defense could allow a blanket of maneuverability units like the 2nd Armored Division on Luzon or 9th Tank Regiment on Saipan never received to support massed combined arms attacks against American lines.

Taiwan's Armored Corps would do well to study the Japanese Tankers at Saipan and Luzon. Taiwan is a large island with terrain features that can be a friendly tank country by a defender. Its many rivers and flat lands, combined with its masses of mountainous terrain can make for a nasty porcupine for any invader, but choosing when and how to employ armor within these terrain features matters a great deal to the goal of destroying a PLA beachhead. The use of Taiwan's older M60s and M48s as mobile pill boxes, scattered throughout the island's frontline formations can be of great use. These units and their main guns are just as powerful as dug in defensive positions as any direct fire artillery could be to support defending infantry. Like Japanese armored employment on Luzon, if proper used in pre-registered zones of interlocking fields of fire, these mobile gun platforms can wreak havoc on the

PLA as they first attempt to establish a beachhead and then break out to hurdle river and bridge after river and bridge. Combined with dug-in infantry, rear artillery support, swarms of unmanned systems at and behind the lines wreaking havoc, and the judicious use of rotary attack aviation, any PLA formation will find it difficult to execute a combined arms assault. The maintenance of an intact mobile reserve, ideally the brigades of newer Abrams and HIMARS, can be held back to conserve their strength long enough to be used to counterattack PLA formations who stretch themselves out into a vulnerable salient. In coordination with Allied strikes against the PLA's amphibious lifeline to sustain their offensive operations, such an armored counter punch could be decisive. The armor can also be a very deadly counter force to quickly overrun airborne or air assault units who attempt to seize vital river crossings or key terrain in any coup de main operations early in the campaign. Unlike Japanese formations, who lacked significant armored firepower compared to their American opponents, the Taiwanese Abrams provide one of the best main battle tanks on the world stage and if used in mass, can increase the possibility of inflicting a large defeat on enemy formations.

The M1A2Ts can be seen as a welcomed entry into Taiwan's defensive order of battle to replace their older American models; however, we should note that introducing ultramodern tanks cannot make for a sound defense alone. Russia's invasion of Ukraine showcased that once again, the tank has not faded away to insignificance, but the invasion has also demonstrated that

tanks are also very vulnerable to light weapons at a fraction of the cost of the main battle tank. Ukraine has exploited the effectiveness of small unmanned aerial vehicles (sUAV) to find, fix, and destroy armored vehicles at a grand scale. A few hundred to thousand dollars' worth of material in the form of a hand-launched quad copter drone with a Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) attached to its bottom can knock out a T-90 and its crew just as fast and easy as an Abrams. The war in Ukraine displays a new series of lessons for professional practitioners of combined arms warfare. Quality counts, but mass remains a critical principle of war that nations like Taiwan must wrestle with when determining defense acquisition. The two new Armored Brigades can be used and used well in an island defense if they are properly deployed within this dangerous environment of loitering sUAVs, always watching and attempting to find a vulnerable target with hatch open or an exposed piece of armor to penetrate. Just as the tank has always developed ways to maintain its status as a powerful instrument of ground combat so have the methods to destroy them. From the Egyptian AT-3 Sagger anti-tank guided missile operator along the Suez Canal in 1973 to the Ukrainian small drone operator in the Kursk salient in 2025, tanks will always be forced to mitigate cheaper solutions that challenge their status on the modern battlefield.



Figure 8: Ukrainian FPV drone unit from the 53rd Mechanized Brigade, launching RPG warhead armed FPV munitions towards Russian positions in Donetsk Oblast. General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine – Business Insider

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