

A View from the West: A ‘Reunified’ China in 2027?

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USCGC *Alex Haley* sails near the China Coast Guard ship 2301 during a joint apprehension of the illegal fishing ship *Run Da* in the Sea of Japan in June 2018.

In 2021, the then-head of US Indo-Pacific Command, USN Admiral Phil Davidson, popularized the idea that China could move against Taiwan as early as 2027.¹ Admiral Davidson did not pluck that date from thin air – in 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping set 2027 as the year in which the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) should be competent in basic joint operations, interpreted as the ability to invade Taiwan. Xi also set 2035 as when the PLA should be fully competent in joint operations and assisted by advanced technology such as Artificial Intelligence (AI). The year 2049 is when the PLA should be a ‘world-class military’ able to defend Chinese interests globally. With now just one year until Admiral Davidson’s predicted invasion date, it is worth looking at what China has been doing to meet the 2027 goal.

First up is the raw ability to move against Taiwan, namely building the ships, planes and missiles not only to soften Taiwanese defences and protect hundreds of thousands of Chinese troops as they cross the Taiwan Strait, but also to feed, fuel and rearm them and prevent foreign intervention over weeks, if not months. On this front, the PLA has made extraordinary advances. Supported by massive ship-building capability, the PLA Navy (PLAN) became the largest navy in the world some time around 2015-16, and now operates three aircraft carriers, with a fourth (possibly nuclear-powered) on the way.² The PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), which would be tasked with firing missiles at Taiwan’s defences and command-and-control centres and deterring the United States and allies, has established a full arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles, including the

much-touted DF-21 and DF-26 ‘carrier-killer’ and ‘Guam-killer’ missiles.³ The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) is ready to battle for air superiority over the strait and protect convoys of troops as they cross, with at least 1,300 fourth-generation aircraft, modern standoff bombers, and a full suite of supporting radar and transport aircraft.⁴

If the PLA does have one significant obstacle to its invasion plans, it is a lack of amphibious ships – it operates 12 Landing Platform Docks and Landing Helicopter Docks, with a 13th beginning sea trials in November 2025.⁵ However, the PLAN has anticipated this problem and has taken steps to mitigate it, including requiring commercial ships to support PLA operations since 2016, and experimenting with modifying civilian cargo ships into shallow-draft landing craft.⁶

However, it is one thing to build a major military, and another altogether to train the separate military branches into one that can smoothly work together under extreme stress over an extended period. The PLA has been working toward exactly that, with large-scale, joint exercises around Taiwan beginning in 2022.

The first such exercise occurred in August 2022, after then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan. The PLA set up seven exercise zones around Taiwan – including at the approaches to the critical Taiwanese ports of Taipei and Kaohsiung – where the PLAN practiced clearing paths for amphibious vessels, blockading key areas, striking sea targets and defending against aerial strikes. A comprehensive mix of PLAAF aircraft flooded across

the strait for aerial superiority drills, and the PLARF launched missiles both at Taiwan's outlying islands in the strait and over Taiwan into waters near Japan's Yonaguni Island.⁷ In all, the 2022 exercise demonstrated for the first time that the PLA could jointly operate over seven days to achieve a major military objective.

Subsequent exercises built on the basic plan established in 2022. The inaugural Joint Sword in 2023 did not have formal exercise zones *per se*, but Taiwan was encircled by the PLA as it had been in 2022, and the *Shandong* aircraft carrier group conducted air drills off southeast Taiwan for the first time. As well, unofficial PLA activity continued for weeks after the exercise formally ended, showing an ability for sustained operations. The Joint Sword 2024A and 2024B exercises revived exercise zones not only around Taiwan proper, but also around Taiwan's outlying islands near the Chinese mainland for the first time. The 2024 Joint Swords took several notable further steps, such as bringing in the China Coast Guard (CCG) – including one of the CCG's massive 12,000-ton *Zhaotou* cutters – to assert coercive law enforcement control within the Taiwan Strait.⁸ Furthermore, the PLAN's first aircraft carrier, *Liaoning*, conducted drills east of Taiwan for the first time.

During the 2025 Strait Thunder exercise the maritime militia was involved for the first time. This introduced the joint 'cabbage' tactic which involves the PLAN, CCG and militia encircling a target to make an appropriate response difficult – how to respond to civilian and maritime law enforcement vessels that are posing national security threats?⁹

Finally, Justice Mission 2025 largely echoed the previous exercises, but added the new elements of the army becoming equally involved with PLARF in combined fires, a rehearsed seizure of Taiwan's Penghu Island just on Taiwan's side of the strait, and a new Type 075 amphibious assault force conducting drills off southeastern Taiwan. Justice Mission also notably occurred in December for

the first time, traditionally a period of lower readiness at the end of the PLA's training cycle, and within the strait's severe monsoon period when conditions are least favourable for amphibious operations.

The result of these years of exercising is that the PLA has a basic, proven plan for joint operations to encircle Taiwan and deter outside interference. At this point, tweaks such as extending the length of the drills, including more civilian vessels and simulating opposing forces can be added to expand the PLA's comfort zone.

While the PLA has undoubtedly developed impressive military kit and the basic ability to use it, high-level confidence that the military will prevail in a conflict has been thrown into question with Xi's escalating anti-corruption campaign. While Xi's crusade against military corruption has been ongoing since 2016, it accelerated in 2023, possibly as Xi saw the consequences of Russia's military corruption in its war on Ukraine. As of February 2026, 101 of a total of 126 generals and admirals have been actually or likely purged.¹⁰ Most shockingly, Generals Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli, first vice-chairman and head of the joint staff department, respectively, on the Central Military Commission (CMC), China's highest military body, were placed under investigation in January 2026 for "serious disciplinary violations."¹¹ Zhang and Liu followed the expulsion of four other CMC members, leaving only two active members – General Zhang Shengmin, head of the CMC's discipline department, and Xi himself.

At least three observations can be made about these purges. First, PLA bureaucracy has likely been greatly slowed, as the CMC has 15 subordinate departments, which must now get approvals on everything from war plans to equipment purchases to military diplomacy from just two CMC leaders. It is also reasonable to expect that PLA officers further down the chain will avoid risky innovation to avoid being swept up in the crackdown, as Zhang's



A crew member of USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19) observes People's Liberation Army (Navy) landing platform dock CNS *Quilianshan* (LPD 999) as it departs Zhanjiang, 24 April 2015.

Credit: Mass Communication Specialist
Seaman Apprentice Timothy Hale, US Navy



Credit: Corporal Brendan Gamache, Formation Imaging Services

HMCS Ville de Québec and HMAS Brisbane transit through the Taiwan Strait during Operation Horizon in the South China Sea, on 6 September 2025.

removal shows that no one – not even a hand-picked Xi confidante – is safe.

Second, the extent of the purges has likely eroded the PLA's overall military readiness in the short to medium term. The PLA is comprised of both operational and political officers, the latter of which are responsible for maintaining political discipline and loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the PLA is the CCP's military, not China's. Almost two-thirds of the officers purged have been from the operational stream, a rate that jumped as high as 85% in the theatre commands.¹² This is especially relevant for a Taiwan contingency, as the head of the Eastern Theatre Command which has jurisdiction over Taiwan operations, General Lin Xiangyang, has also been expelled from the PLA and CCP, while his political commissar, Admiral Liu Qingsong, has been sidelined and may have been purged by association.¹³ Furthermore, the extent of PLA corruption is deep, as evidenced by Xi's recent purging of his previous hand-picked appointees, indicating that while reducing corruption could increase PLA readiness, the rot may be too deep to reach that goal.

Third, the PLA is not likely to be able to meet its goal of basic readiness for a conflict over Taiwan in 2027 because the PLAN and PLARF, both of which are critical for an amphibious invasion, were disproportionately hit by the anti-corruption purges. And while deputy commanders have stepped up, it could take years to make up the sudden leadership gap. Additionally, analysis of statements around Zhang's expulsion indicates that he was purged for opposing Xi's 2027 readiness goals, especially on joint training. Zhang had reportedly not finalized a joint training model necessary for 2027, and instead favoured a slower, more progressive training rollout than Xi, which would have pushed the PLA's joint operational capability closer to 2035.¹⁴

Overall, the question of whether China will move on Taiwan in 2027 is still an open one. The PLA is undoubtedly

making significant strides by building up the forces needed for an attack and steadily learning how to use them jointly. However, the PLA's leadership in peacetime and command-and-control in wartime has been significantly eroded by Xi's anti-corruption efforts, and PLA leadership could take years to rebuild. In the end, though, does the 2027 goal really matter? So long as there is a hostile China intent on taking Taiwan, just maintaining the status quo will require constant attention, signaling and countermeasures until Beijing changes its policy. 🇨🇳

Notes

- * The views in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the policies of the Department of National Defence or the Royal Canadian Navy.
- 1. Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, "Hearing to Receive Testimony on United States INDOPACIFIC Command," 9 March 2021, pp. 48-49.
- 2. See Alexander Palmer, et al., "Unpacking China's Naval Buildup," Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 5 June 2024; and Thomas Newdick, "Strong Evidence that China's Next Carrier will be Nuclear Emerges in Shipyard Photo," *The War Zone*, 12 November 2025.
- 3. Gerry Doyle and Blake Herzinger, *Carrier Killer: China's Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles and Theater of Operations in the early 21st Century* (Warwick, UK: Helion, 2022).
- 4. US Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," 2024 Report to Congress, pp. 61-62.
- 5. Alex Luck, "Chinese Type 076 Amphibious Assault Ship 'Sichuan' Starts Sea Trials in Shanghai," *Naval News*, 14 November 2025.
- 6. See Thomas Shugart and J. Michael Dahm, "Flooding the Zone: The Use of Civilian Landing Crafts (LCT) in PLA Amphibious Operations," China Maritime Studies Institute Note 18, US Naval War College, 7 January 2026.
- 7. China Power Team, "Tracking the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis," China Power, CSIS, 2024.
- 8. Yu-cheng Chen, "Joint Sword-2024A: Blockades and Gray Zone Tactics," *Jamestown*, 26 July 2024.
- 9. Tai-yuan Yang and K. Tristan Tang, "'Strait Thunder-2025A' Drill Implies Future Increase in PLA Pressure on Taiwan," *Jamestown*, 11 April 2025.
- 10. Bonny Lin, et al., "The Purges Within China's Military are Even Deeper than You Think," CSIS, China Power, 24 February 2026.
- 11. K. Tristan Kang, "Zhang Youxia's Differences with Xi Jinping Led to His Purge," *Jamestown*, 26 January 2026.
- 12. Lin et al., "The Purges Within China's Military are Even Deeper than You Think."
- 13. Zi Lang, "Leadership Turmoil Impacts Eastern Theater Command Readiness," *Jamestown*, 25 November 2025.
- 14. Kang, "Zhang Youxia's Differences with Xi Jinping Led to His Purge."

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