

The First Battle

Operations in the South China Sea

by Dr. Benjamin Jensen & Maj Rob Spodarek

The following is the second in a series of fictional accounts of a hypothetical engagement between the Chinese and U.S. militaries in the South China Sea.¹ The road to war was previously published in the Marine Corps Gazette and took the reader through a notional diplomatic crisis that escalates into hostilities between China and a U.S.-treaty ally. This account, in the Defense of Duffer's Drift style, describes how the first battle might occur as the U.S. deploys a Joint Task Force (JTF 77) to the area to link up with elements of a Littoral Combat Group (LCG) and a Marine Littoral Regiment. The story is based on observations from eight iterations of fighting a joint scenario with participants in the TECOM Warfighting Society and School of Advanced Warfighting as part of their capstone planning exercise series Agile Competition and Agile Response. These wargames revealed that the conflict was costly, indecisive, and should be avoided to the greatest extent possible.

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After receiving a final brief from his staff, JTF 77 Commander LtGen Wiggin returned to his quarters to get some sleep. His mind shifted between thinking through the situation, likely enemy forces, coalition capabilities, and the larger environment. He drifted into a dream.

LtGen Wiggin saw the INDOPA-COM J2 briefing him. The intelligence officer spoke with a measured tone using a series of maps with overlaid weapon ranges. The J2 estimated that the most likely course of action for the Chinese Southern Theater Command would be to establish a covering force of submarines, frigates, and missile boats near key choke points in the littorals that con-

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These hypothetical engagements played out in wargames conducted by the School of Advanced Warfighting and the TECOM Warfighting Society. (Photo by Maj Devon McRainey.)

trolled access to the South China Sea.² High-altitude UAVs integrated with cyber- and space-based assets would support this covering force, searching over the horizon for U.S. forces heading to the area.³ Nuclear attack subs would be forward stalking critical supply ships.⁴ The Chinese Southern Theater Command would hold back the Surface Action Group (SAGs) and Carrier Strike Groups as a counterattack force and to reinforce the larger deception ploy that their forces were poised to threaten Taiwan.

The Chinese knew the value of interior lines.⁵ Their scattered airbases in the South China Sea would launch fighters in waves to create a series of

defensive counter air patrols allowing them to pull U.S. forces into integrated air and missile defense ambushes. PRC Chinese forces would form a 21st century layered defense.⁶

The Chinese knew their air- and surface-based long-range cruise missile and hypersonic ranges were longer and their magazine was deeper than the United States, letting them focus on engagement area development and pulling U.S. SAGs and Carrier Strike Groups into kill boxes. If they could disrupt information flow and command and control (C2) links between U.S. units, it would help them paralyze Coalition defenses and mass fires on high value targets. These actions were consistent

with a People's Liberation Army (PLA) reconnaissance-intelligence operational system transitioning to a firepower-strike system designed to destroy U.S. forces, isolate U.S. allies, and produce a short, sharp conventional military victory that allowed the Chinese to dictate diplomatic terms in peace talks.⁷

LtGen Wiggin stopped the J2 and asked his staff what the phasing and sequencing of PLA forces would be. His primary staff told him after cyber, space, and electronic attacks disrupted communications, the priority for Chinese fires would be aircraft carriers and the longer runways U.S. aircraft would need to maintain sorties generation. Wiggin had war gamed this scenario, the Joint Anti-Aircraft Raid, over the course of his career.

Yet, he did not see the Chinese likely to make that move in this crisis. The Chinese did not want to escalate to a global war against the United States and draw in additional allies like Japan or Australia. They were not going to open hostilities with the United States by sinking an aircraft carrier, attacking Guam, or destroying a U.S.-base in Japan. That logic reflected misusing 20th century historical analogies like Pearl Harbor and the Chinese intervention in Korea.⁸ It was too escalatory and did not give the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) the bargaining space they needed to force a favorable concession. Senior communist leaders were not gamblers and risk takers; they were clever bureaucrats integrating deterrence operations with larger strategic objectives.⁹

At the strategic level, LtGen Wiggin thought the CCP was calculating that they could focus on the United States and its treaty ally alone to signal the risk of other Asia-Pacific nations getting involved. The goal was isolation not annihilation, but even the cautious prewar posture carried inadvertent escalation risks.¹⁰

LtGen Wiggin had a red team look through recent exercises and do a series of alternative analyses. The team told him PLA officers felt pressured by increasingly nationalistic, anti-foreign propaganda by the CCP and were prone to Service-level competition for party favor and promotion.¹¹ At a deeper level,

they were eager to prove themselves in combat. These factors would make them more likely to fire at U.S. targets of opportunity they assessed would get them credit for acting with initiative. While doctrine and strategic guidance still favored graduated pressure leveraging non-lethal effects before using

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massed lethal fires to maximize diplomatic off-ramps, human factors left the PLA overly eager and aggressive. There were organizational and human factors that changed risk propensity at the operational and tactical level.¹²

As he dreamt, Wiggin saw the combat operations center as the JTF moved into an assembly area near the South China Sea. He saw himself with the expeditionary strike group while USINDOPACOM coordinated with the joint staff for additional forces and began moving carrier strike groups and air force expeditionary forces into theater.

He planned to keep the expeditionary strike group at a distance until F-35s from the landing helicopter assault ship and F-22s moving to the area established local air superiority. Planners envisioned using a combination of tomahawk land-attack missiles and joint air-to-surface standoff missile attacks by B-1 bombers against reclaimed island installations to lower Chinese aircraft sortie generation and the PLA's ability to control the South China Sea.¹³ It was a spoiling attack designed to buy time to build up combat power in the area. Once these conditions were set, the expeditionary strike group would link up with the littoral combat group and conduct an amphibious assault to seize the airfield Chinese forces were occupying. Expeditionary advanced bases (EABs) already set up by the littoral combat group would provide additional forward air refueling points for aircraft and strike

sites to support ground forces assaulting the airfield and establish blocking positions to prevent Chinese amphibious forces from reaching the base.¹⁴ These fires assets would link up with unmanned intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms operating from the EABs to attack Chinese surface connectors and initial troop concentrations either at the airfield or conducting amphibious operations nearby.

While it was a textbook plan, the course of action left LtGen Wiggin uneasy. Plans like this usually assumed two carrier strike groups, and he had none. COMUSINDOPACOM was still convinced the Chinese were preparing for a larger war and held them to defend Japan and to blunt Chinese activity toward Taiwan. Wiggin thought the Chinese were bluffing, and this was just an elaborate ruse designed to keep U.S. combat power away from the South China Sea. Without those carrier strike groups, his sortie generation would be lower because of the long flight times from Guam and Japan. Establishing local air superiority was a must for this mission. He needed it to conduct anti-submarine warfare missions and conduct anti-scouting missions designed to roll-back PLA intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities. Wiggin was worried that Air Force elements surging into partner bases would be vulnerable to attack and the bases isolated by a mix of cyber-attacks and sabotage.¹⁵ He would be most vulnerable at the beginning of the operation, but he had to deploy. The Littoral Combat Group—an amphibious transport ship, littoral combat ship, and a guided-missile destroyer and a Marine littoral regiment were operating alone. They had defensive and strike capabilities, but only enough to buy limited time for U.S. forces to deploy.¹⁶ National command authority wanted a visible sign of U.S. forces moving into the area and challenging Chinese aggression. His hands were tied.

In the dream, Wiggin was pulled from his thoughts by buzzing sounds and the chatter of helm operators identifying multiple events, the noise of scared humans deciphering cold machines. "Launch warnings detected at multiple PLARF sites, high confidence," shouted

one operator. "AEGIS, global hawks and F-35s report at least 4 J-15 fighters moving at high speed to intercept, possible H-6 bombers detected moving into position," screamed another. "Multiple vampires inbound towards the littoral combat group" another operator confirmed to the officer in charge. The PLA was not massing fires; they were simultaneously attacking two different target sets.

The ballistic and cruise missiles were the first to impact. They hit a series of forward, distributed air bases where U.S. crews were preparing to receive F-22s and other expeditionary air packages as well as some of the forward air refueling points sites set up by the EABs. It was not the big strike against large airbases in Japan but a more localized attack on U.S. forces. The geography made it difficult for the guided-missile destroyer to intercept the missiles and the forward deployed MADIS systems were quickly overwhelmed.¹⁷ LtGen Wiggin took a breath and estimated the situation: the PLA was moving to

in Beijing executing a wedge strategy and CCP officials also reaching out to regional allies of the United States and warning them not to get involved.

In this dream, Wiggin was pulled from the strategic to the tactical by shouts in his operations center. The second wave of anti-ship cruise missiles appeared to be massed salvos fired from the missile boats, frigates, and subs. The salvo was headed for the ships in the LCG. The ships defenses destroyed most of the incoming missiles, but the amphibious transport ship and littoral combat ship took multiple direct hits. The crews struggled to contain the damage. Few were prepared for the carnage and emotional toll of watching fellow Sailors die.

The fighting lasted only two hours, but the damage was done. The amphibious transport ship and littoral combat ship were sunk. The guided-missile destroyer was badly damaged. Its missile inventory was so low it would have to sail back to the nearest weapons station to reload and seek repairs. The EABs

B-1s successfully attacked a PLAN SAG and installations in the South China Sea, sinking two ships and destroying multiple surface-to-air missile sites. The results were inconclusive. PLA forces retained control of the airfield and denied U.S. forces the ability to access the area from the land and sea.¹⁸

By the end of the first day, political turmoil caused the partner nation the United States was protecting to negotiate a cease-fire with the Chinese. Chinese military forces stood down in the South China Sea but stayed on high alert around Taiwan and Japan. Chinese forces made no further large-scale attacks, with only sporadic air-to-air contact over the next week. The Pacific descended into 21st century maritime trench warfare, with each side for political reasons standing fast. In the month that followed, new loan guarantees from Beijing alongside the threat of further attacks led multiple countries to declare neutrality, thus limiting U.S. power projection in the region. In Washington, defense officials briefed the Secretary of Defense that the United States lacked sufficient inventories of air-to-air, anti-ship, and other key munitions to prosecute a protracted conflict without jeopardizing other theaters. Senior Department of State officials questioned whether allies in the region would support any further confrontation with the Chinese.

Wiggin's dream created a collage of cable news hosts, Congressional committees, and military officers debating the battle. The after-action review was damning. First, limited infrastructure investments and strategic sealift alongside poor Service cooperation made expeditionary basing more a dream than an option.¹⁹ The lack of long runways, storage facilities, and spaces to park aircraft as well as limited service coordination to operate adaptive and expeditionary bases limited air options and forced air assets to operate over-the-horizon. Many of the expeditionary bases lacked credible decoys and still did not take full advantage of unmanned and optionally manned systems. Worse still, the magazine depth for anti-ship missiles, air-to-air missiles, and other key items were too low to sustain a protracted con-

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disrupt his ability to launch aircraft in the immediate vicinity as a means of gaining a tactical advantage and strategically limiting the militarized dispute from escalating. The PLA appeared to focus the cruise missiles at the larger EABs with fuel supplies while ballistic missiles cratered larger runways and hit ammunition storage sites. Smaller, fires-based EABs were able to survive but struggled to acquire long-range targets. The PLA had deliberately engaged from outside the ability of U.S. forces to counterattack. Wiggin imagined at this moment senior Chinese leaders were privately contacting U.S. diplomats, showing them footage of the damage and threatening a broader war unless the United States backed down. He imag-

were devastated by the cruise missile attacks. Casualties were limited, but the attack destroyed critical systems and left formations in disarray.

The Marine forces that survived were moving away from the sites in broken, injured teams scattered across the island archipelago. Many would be stranded for days as the JTF scrambled to contain the fighting enough to rescue them.

Though the maritime fight was lost, Wiggin sought to gain the initiative in the air. By the time fighter aircraft launched from Japan and Guam arrived, they shot down 25 Chinese fighters around the island but lost 10 aircraft to a combination of air-to-air combat and HQ-9s surface-to-air missiles launched from the SAG and the islands.

flict—limiting U.S. options and almost guaranteeing the Chinese *fait accompli*.

Second, the littoral combat group did not have sufficient firepower, with the amphibious transport ship (LPD) lacking a vertical launch system and Marine units lacking longer range anti-ship munitions and organic intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities to scout over-the-horizon and target for the joint force. Even if the ships would have survived the first hour, they had limited options for engaging the Chinese SAG. In a contested environment the amphibious transport ship and smaller light amphibious warship struggled to get its force ashore fast enough to deny Chinese military objectives. Commentators asked why the naval team did not field more unmanned attack boats and dual-purpose, long-range unmanned loitering intelligence and attack options.²⁰

While the United States and China avoided World War III, the crisis illustrated the devastating costs of battle in a precision-strike age. What could be seen, could be targeted. What could be targeted, could be destroyed or degraded past the point of utility. The side that maintained longer-range attack options, better intelligence, and used a mix of denial and deception as well as integrated, layered defenses, and fortified positions to survive would gain a position of relative advantage. Massing effects were now more important than massing forces. The first side to lose its ability to see and shoot would open up even distributed forces to inevitable destruction, thus putting a premium on redundancy and magazine depth. While neither side wanted strategic escalation—whether nuclear, large-scale cyber, or space—initial losses pushed decision makers towards untenable choices.

LtGen Wiggin woke up from his dream. It was still the middle of the night and the silence of his quarters was deceiving. He wondered if he had just seen his fate. Though exhausted, his mind raced as he closed his eyes, searching for a little sleep before the confrontation ahead. He had to find a way to change his fate and that of the thousands of servicemen and woman that depended on him in the days

ahead. There had to be way out of this quagmire.

Notes

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17. For an overview of the MADIS system, see MARCORSSYSTEM, available at <https://www.marcorsyscom.marines.mil>."

18. The airfield in question was the major objective of the initial attack discussed in Benjamin Jensen, "The Crisis," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (February 2020), available at <https://mca-marines.org>.

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