

Taiwan Considers “Porcupine Strategy” Against Chinese Invasion

By Cindy Hurst
OE Watch Commentary

In recent years, Taiwan has felt an increasing sense of urgency to develop a strong system of defense because mounting cross-Strait tensions, China’s growing military might, and gray-zone activities that are one step short of the use of force. Since 2017, some Taiwanese commentators have advocated for the development of a “porcupine strategy” to ward off a potential Chinese invasion.¹ A porcupine strategy, viewed as asymmetric warfare, is used by a weaker opponent to counter an attack from a more powerful one. In Taiwan’s case, this would mean hardening its defenses and inflicting many small, but significant and early, losses for China using many weapons spread throughout the island. As described in the first excerpt, published in Taiwan’s English-language publication *Taipei Times*, “the pain of stepping on (a porcupine’s) quills become the main deterrent to crushing it.”

Taiwan's asymmetrical warfare strategy is commonly referred to as the ‘the porcupine strategy.’ A porcupine braces itself by hardening its many quills when faced with a huge predator.

The second excerpted article, published by the newly established English-language news and opinion site, *Japan Forward*, also discusses the porcupine strategy. The article attributes retired Admiral Lee Hsi-ming, who served as chief of Taiwan’s General Staff from 2017 to 2019, with being the architect of Taiwan’s overall defense strategy, at which a porcupine approach was the core. Lee argues that the best option is to deter the enemy from attacking. This article also describes a scenario in which People’s Liberation Army forces gather around Taiwan to conduct standard military exercises prior to the unexpected attack. While larger Taiwanese targets, such as fighter jets and large naval vessels, would be easier to see and therefore destroy if taken by surprise by China, smaller mobile weapon systems that are well dispersed throughout the island and its environs—such as small missile-equipped boats, multiple rocket launchers, and mobile missiles—would be less vulnerable. However, according to the article, while Taiwanese leadership understands the importance of asymmetric weapons, the Taiwanese armed forces have not yet fully embraced the “porcupine strategy.”

Source: “Editorial: ‘Porcupine Strategy’ the Right Move,” *Taipei Times* (Taiwan’s English-language sister publication of *Liberty Times*), 29 April 2022. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/04/29/2003777394>

Taiwan’s Overall Defense Concept is based on a strategy of asymmetric warfare. Instead of acquiring expensive jets and submarines, the strategy focuses on deployments of mobile and concealable defensive weapons across Taiwan, especially missiles for use against ships and planes. This is the “porcupine strategy” — the pain of stepping on the animal’s quills becomes the main deterrent to crushing it.

Source: Yoshiaki Nishimi, “Taiwan Military Expert: ‘Porcupine Strategy’ Could Deter Chinese Invasion,” *Japan Forward* (a new English-language news and opinion website), 27 January 2023. <https://japan-forward.com/taiwan-military-expert-porcupine-strategy-could-deter-chinese-invasion/>

...retired admiral Lee Hsi-ming, who served as chief of the General Staff of the Republic of China (Taiwan) from 2017 to 2019. He spoke to a group of reporters, including a Sankei Shimbun correspondent, in Taipei in November of last year. During his time in office, as the military power gap with China rapidly widened, [retired admiral Lee Hsi-ming, who served as chief of the General Staff of the Republic of China... from 2017 to 2019] sought ways to defend Taiwan through “asymmetric operations.” In fact, Taiwan’s “Overall Defense Concept,” which has this strategy at its core, is his brainchild.

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Continued: Taiwan Considers “Porcupine Strategy” Against Chinese Invasion

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"Taiwan needs an asymmetric strategy to deter China," Lee emphasizes. "That means having a large number of small weapons that are less susceptible to long-range attacks, more mobile, and capable of conducting precision strikes."

"Taiwan does not have the strength to go toe-to-toe against China in a traditional 'symmetrical war' involving aircraft carriers against aircraft carriers, warplanes against warplanes, and tanks against tanks. After all, there is a disparity of more than twenty times between their defense budgets."

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"The best course of action is to deter the enemy and keep him from making a move," explains Lee. "To that end, Taiwan must prepare itself as quickly as possible. We must demonstrate that we have the capacity to prevent a successful Chinese invasion."

Lee argues that the only option for Taiwan is "deterrence by denial." In other words, a defense capable of physically blocking an attack by the other side. What scenario does Lee offer in which Taiwan would be able to repel the People's Liberation Army (PLA)?

Notes:

[1] The concept of a porcupine strategy gained popularity following the 2008 release of a study published in the *Naval War College Review*. At the time, Taiwan was intent on building up its weapons systems to try to match those of the People's Liberation Army. Countering Taiwan's belief that like weapons would help to deter China from attacking, the study instead described using alternative asymmetric warfare to counter China's short-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and manned tactical aircraft. For more information, please see: William S. Murray, "Revisiting Taiwan's Defense Strategy," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 61, No. 3, Article 3, 2008. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1814&context=nwc-review>