

US Army should choose Taiwan

Written by Grant Newsham
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Any military veteran recalls the excuse: “I didn’t get the word.”

Such appears the case with the US Army.

It has begun two weeks of humanitarian assistance-disaster relief (HA/DR) training in Hawaii with China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

The operation began despite US Vice President Mike Pence and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo characterizing China as a dangerous adversary. The Pentagon’s National Security Strategy shares the sentiment, along with bipartisan agreement on the matter in the US Congress.

The US Army has not known what it thinks about China for several years. In 2013, the commander of US Army Pacific said that he did not consider the PLA a threat.

The training exercise, known as Pacific Resilience, has been held annually since 2005 — even as China locked up the South Sea China, cracked down on 1 million-plus Uighurs, seized territory from the Philippines (a US treaty ally), tightened the noose on Taiwan, harassed US ships, bullied South Korea while keeping North Korea afloat and nuclear-armed, and conducted aggressive political warfare against US allies in the south and central Pacific.

The other US military services have their problems, too.

In 2014, then-head of the US Pacific Command, US Navy Admiral Samuel Locklear, said climate change — not China — was his biggest worry.

The US Marine Corps commandant visited the PLA Marines in 2008 and gave them a “boys be ambitious” sort of pep talk.

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Despite its leaders' boasts that the US Army is back in the Pacific and itching to get into a fight, the exercise suggests a curious passive-aggressiveness toward the Chinese threat — or less charitably, resembles a rooster crowing from atop the barnyard dung heap.

The administration of US President Donald Trump might be distracted with Ukrainian matters, but US Indo-Pacific Command — located a few kilometers away from US Army Pacific headquarters — has some explaining to do.

While some argue the training exercise is just disaster relief, 90 percent of the skills involved in this type of operation are identical to those required for combat. So help the PLA master joint operations and the payback will come during a war against US forces.

Moreover, improve Chinese HA/DR capabilities and expect the PLA to horn into disaster relief operations in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond — harvesting the political goodwill that comes with it — at the expense of the US. At some point, there is the possibility that US help might not be needed or welcome.

Consider the optics of the US Army and PLA in a training “love fest,” while the US government and military are warning that the nation had better get ready for a fight.

At best it suggests US leaders cannot think straight — or are not serious about a supposed China threat.

Or perhaps the Uighur concentration camps, freedom in Hong Kong and bullying the US' friends does not matter that much.

Indeed, the US invites an avowed adversary — just read the Chinese press for a week, or recall the Chinese admiral who called for the sinking of a few US Navy ships and the killing of 10,000 Americans — to visit Hawaii to train.

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Meanwhile, the Taiwanese military cannot get the time of day from US forces. It has suffered 40 years of effective isolation — and joint training exercises with the US remain off-limits.

So while the US Army locks arms with the PLA, it is apparently too much for it to train with Taiwan — a democracy of 23 million that is indispensable to the US Asia-Pacific defense posture — even though there is the implicit guarantee to protect Taiwan.

Even though the Trump administration has been more supportive of Taiwan than any other, it still will not cooperate with its armed forces.

There are excuses of course, but not convincing ones: “Taiwan needs to spend more on defense,” or “Taiwan won’t organize its defense properly.”

Sometimes the impressive, but condescending “opportunity cost” is tossed in for good measure — as if only the US knows what is best for Taiwan.

It is a situation deserving of an investigation by the US Congress.

The complaints regarding Taiwan, in fact, apply to most allies and partners of the US — almost none of which spend what they should, or do what Washington wants.

Japan is a prime example.

According to the US government, it spends too little and has a military unable to do joint operations — and unwilling to do more.

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Maybe if the US was willing to truly engage and train with Taiwan's military it might be easier to persuade it to improve its defenses.

Instead of inviting the PLA to Hawaii for exercises, why not invite Taiwan's navy and its marines?

They are friends, after all, and Taiwan has not locked up 1 million of its citizens in "vocational training" camps.

Taiwan even has democratic elections looming on Jan. 11.

If the columnist Charles Krauthammer were still alive, he would know exactly what to say about the US Army's Hawaii exercise: "Good grief."

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