Why building boring, unarmed ships is an indicator for war with Taiwan

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3 Main Points

China is building a new type of landing ship, unarmed but the opposite of harmless. Constructing these ships seems to have only one explanation: concrete Chinese plans for an invasion of Taiwan. Or are these ships just part of a faint to divert resources into the defense of an attack that never comes? EPIS Senior Fellow Ferdinand Wegener argues that there is no faint

and a Chinese invasion is coming, even if pinpointing when it will start is near impossible.

About the Author

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As covered by the renowned naval defence analyst H.I. Sutton, a new class of Chinese support ships has been spotted, for which only one ominous purpose seems possible. These ships are a class of at least 6 mobile landing peer barges, seen first on satellite imagery on January 8th, 2025, in the Guangzhou shipyards.

At first, these seem quite harmless and even boring. They are unarmed, not particularly large, and they don't contain any cutting-edge tech like stealth features or advanced phased array radar. Instead, they feature mundane extendable road bridges and hydraulic cylinder pistons that can lift them out of the water and stabilize them near beaches. They seem more like lumbering gentle giants than the four (or in this case six) horsemen of the apocalypse.

But appearances can be deceiving. Just like the space race was, at least in part, a thinly veiled threat of how easy it would be to deliver a nuclear weapon to the enemy homeland if one can send a man to the moon, these barges might not be a nuclear weapon itself, but they are the rocket they can be easily mounted on.

What are these ships and what do they do?

These ships were aptly named "Invasion barges" by experts, as they feature up to a 150-meter-long road bridge on the front to reach onto beaches and a stern loading ramp so that vehicles can be directly loaded onto the barge from the back. This loading might not only be done by the fleet of official Chinese Navy amphibious ships like the eight Type-71 landing platform docks or the four Type-75 assault carriers, but also by a ubiquitous number of repurposed car ferries, now carrying armoured vehicles. Chinese roll-on and roll-off car ferries are legally required to be built to dual-use specifications, meaning they can not only support the weight of civilian cargo trucks but also the increased weight of military vehicles such as the Chinese Type 99A main battle tank, weighing in at over 55 tons.

There seem to be three distinct types of different invasion barges already, creatively named Type 1 to 3 by observers. They don't differ in role, just in their overall length (128m, 108m and 185m) and the length of their landing bridges (120m, 133m, 150m) for Type 1, 2 and 3 respectively. These ships are also not just prototypes or one-off experiments. Instead, they are

being mass-produced as we speak and have already been seen at military exercises. On the beach of a Chinese island that could be mistaken for the Taiwanese shore at a glance, one ship of each of the three types were linked together, creating an even longer bridge which was used to unload vehicles.

Although impressive, this manoeuvre would most likely not be used in combat, firstly because this way, not all on and off ramps can be used at the same time nor at full capacity and secondly, because linking three landing barges up would create an even more lumbering, more vulnerable and more lucrative target, almost begging to be struck by artillery, anti-ship missiles or whatever else can reach it. Have I mentioned the ships are neither armed nor armoured?

Invasion barges are for invasions

These ships leave little room for speculation on their intended role, as the barges would only be militarily useful in an invasion. Not only that, they would also only be useful in a quite specific one, where the enemy had wide beaches and your own supply lines were short, let's say, like Taiwan. These ships are a harbinger of the news that the Chinese invasion plans are very concrete and the, admittedly lengthy, preparations to carry said specific plans out are already in motion. One might build or deploy amphibious assault ships to leave open the possibility of invasion threats and therefore force opponents to cover more of their coastline, but one wouldn't build ships only usefully in that specific role, if that role wasn't part of any future military plan. The vessels are otherwise unarmed and wouldn't serve another military purpose other than supporting a beach head, already created by a marine assault, with heavy vehicles and supplies. Or, at least, I can't think of another logical application, although a part of me wishes there is a humanitarian use case out there that I am obviously missing.

So, does that mean there are really no other options and China would only build these ships if it was intending to use them for an invasion? Couldn't they just be part of military intimidation or a faint invasion, tricking the Taiwanese into wasting resources on defending its shores? Sadly, no. The invasion barges themselves seem quite the opposite of intimidating, being slow and not only defence- but offenseless. And there have been famous historic examples of faint amphibious invasions, but they look very different.

A historic naval invasion faint from an unlikely source

One of those famous historic examples surprisingly happened in a war that we all associate much more with tanks rolling over yellow desert sand than with warships navigating the vast blue ocean. Just before the start of the ground action against Iraqi forces during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the US military let Marine formations practice amphibious assaults on Kuwait and made sure the media (and the Iraqis) knew all about it. Then, when Operation Desert Storm began in earnest later that year, the coalition forces used a ruse to lure Iraqi forces out of position. A large naval group, even consisting of the refurbished WW2 battleships Wisconsin and

Missouri, sailed up and down the Iraqi-occupied coast of Kuwait, leading to Iraqi divisions being stationed close-by for coastal defence. These troops were then fired upon by the naval group, which was not only sporting heavy 16-inch guns, but also a heavy complement of journalists.

One of those attendings wrote in a New York Times article, military officers described the bombardment as "a further indication that an American-led amphibious assault on occupied Kuwait might be drawing near". Sufficiently spooked, the Iraqis diverted even more troops to the coast, leading to a more target rich environment for the guns of the naval group and leaving a weakened defensive line to stand against the upcoming coalition ground invasion.

Military history fact: The naval gunfire of the old WW2 battleships, firing 16-inch diameter (40cm) main guns with each shell weighting in at 2,700 pounds (1,225 kg), was so devastating that some Iraqi troops waved a white flag towards a US drone that was directing the gunfire, therefore marking the first time in history, human soldiers surrendered to an unmanned vehicle.

One of these things is not like the others – Why Taiwan is not a faint

Trivia aside, what makes this historic faint so different from a hypothetical faint in Taiwan, featuring the invasion barges? Most obvious is the scale of it all. While the Desert Storm faint used a few thousand US Marines and existing naval vessels as a lure, China is building the world's largest fleet of specialized amphibious assault ships and auxiliaries, including these barges. Going back to the space race metaphors, it is similar to the conspiracy theories of the fake moon landing. If, for the conspiracy to work, you have to build and launch a moon capable rocket in front of thousands of eyewitnesses, just to then fake the landing itself in a studio, why not just go through with the actual moon landing? The same goes for China: Why go through all the trouble of building a huge invasion fleet and specialized ships, accompanied by the largest marine forces in the world, only to then use them only as a faint?

In a similar vein, the Chinese invasion of Taiwan, which was once humorously nicknamed the "million-man swim" by US Navy observers in reference to the insufficient logistics and too few ships for such an attack, has evolved into something that seems at least attemptable for the Chinese forces within the decade. The amphibious capacity of the Chinese military is the largest in the world, far away from being a token force, barely large enough to faint a naval landing, as is the case in so many navies. In fact, these Chinese forces have got so large and capable that they are starting to seriously rival the US military in the region, repeatedly leading to even the painful loss of a US carrier in luckily still hypothetical war gaming scenarios of a US defence against a Taiwan invasion. Lastly, if the invasion barges were just part of a naval invasion faint, what are they luring the Taiwanese forces away from? Taiwan is an island, and any attack will sooner or later have to pass Taiwan's shores. And although the Chinese paratrooper corps isn't

small either, it would not stand a chance taking over Taiwan on its own, even if most Taiwanese forces were lured into manning the coastal defences.

So, if beaches become more accessible via the new invasion barges and the civilian ferries can complement the existing transport capacity of the rapidly growing amphibious landing ship fleet, why hasn't a Taiwan invasion already been carried out by the CCP's armed forces, as so many analysts have predicted and keep predicting with increasing urgency?

Amphibious invasions are hard

Luckily for peace on this planet, amphibious invasions are hard. Very hard. So hard in fact, that even within the ranks of military experts, when you hear "amphibious invasion", everyone thinks D-Day, because that is the only successful one anyone can remember. It has been 81 years since D-Day, and there have been a lot more naval invasion plans, but very few were ever carried out and even fewer were successful. Many factors must come together to make an invasion plan, however detailed and well-prepared, a reality. There needs to be political will, not only in the commitment to the invasion to achieve a shared goal, but also the will to accept the negative consequences and losses associated with both winning and, even worse, losing in an invasion scenario.

To make an invasion successful, the CCP leadership would need to accept giving up some control over the military to high-ranking generals, allowing them to coordinate on war plans and having the power to execute and, if necessary, adapt them. It is precisely this coordination and relinquishing of power that is looked upon with extreme suspicion in dictatorships, where power struggles between the party and military leaderships often broil beneath the surface and military takeovers are a real risk.

Furthermore, apart from the obvious deterrents of Taiwan's and the US military strength, potential sanctions, trade embargos and a myriad of other factors, even in the 21st century, an invasion only seems plausible in certain autumn months, because for all the technological progress in the world, no invasion will happen during stormy seas or on foggy, rain drenched beaches. Adding to that, not a single successful invasion in recent memory has happened without clear air superiority over the defending army, and just that air superiority seems to swing in America's favour, for now. More on that in my publication on the new Chinese J-36 and my upcoming EPIS magazine article on the US F-47.

Chinese invasion plans: Not bluffing, but miscalculating

Therefore, even though the construction of invasion barges by the Chinese, in conjunction with leadership speeches and military preparations, is a clear sign they are not bluffing but are seriously planning for an invasion of Taiwan, knowing when the Chinese think all the required factors align to start said planned invasion remains open to interpretation. Crucially, the date chosen by the CCP to start the invasion does not have to coincide with a time when those factors are actually met and success is therefore likely, see "Russian invasion of Ukraine" for details. Sadly, even a miscalculated

invasion plan with no clear path to victory will, if acted upon, lead to immeasurable pain and suffering. Let us hope that the invasion barges are not the shiny new addition to a growing arsenal that leads CCP planners to conclude the equation solves in their favour.

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