

Demetri Kofinas: 00:00:00 Today's episode of Hidden Forces is made possible by listeners like you. For more information about this week's episode or for easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you listen to the show on your Apple Podcast app, remember, you can give us a review. Each review helps more people find the show and join our amazing community. And with that, please enjoy this week's episode.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:00:48 What's up, everybody? My guest on this episode of Hidden Forces is Ian Easton, senior director at The Project 2049 Institute, where he conducts research on defense and security issues in Asia. He is also the author of "The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia."

Demetri Kofinas: 00:01:10 The Taiwan Strait is one of the most dangerous flashpoints on Earth and the island of Taiwan sits right in the middle of one of the busiest maritime sea and air routes in the world. It is situated at the very center of what is known as the first island chain, stretching from as far south as Vietnam and Indonesia all the way up through the Philippines and north of Japan, giving it unique strategic and commercial significance as a gateway to the Pacific.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:01:42 In this two-hour long conversation, Ian provides us with an extraordinary overview of the island's history, its strategic, commercial, and political significance, and what an invasion of Taiwan would mean for the United States, for its allies, and for the world. It's an episode you won't want to miss, I promise.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:02:04 And with that, please enjoy this timely conversation with my guest, Ian Easton.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:02:15 Ian, welcome to Hidden Forces.

Ian Easton: 00:02:17 Demetri, thanks for having me.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:02:19 It's great to have you on. So, where are you located, for our listeners.

Ian Easton: 00:02:23 I'm located in Arlington, Virginia, just outside of Washington.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:02:27 And how long have you been at The 2049 Institute?

Ian Easton: 00:02:31 Well, I first joined as a non-resident affiliate in 2009 and the reason I was a non-resident is I was just out of grad school and I was living in Taiwan at the time. I was a translator by day for a software company, but my real passion was in issues like the one that we're going to be talking about today and they brought me aboard to do some research for them and then within about two years that evolved into a full-time position, and so, I moved from Taiwan here to Arlington.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:03:02 So how did you first become interested in Taiwan? Where did you get the idea to study there?

Ian Easton: 00:03:08 Well, in a way it was kind of an accident. I grew up in the Midwest, in rural Illinois, a small town about two hour drive outside Chicago. Where I grew up I, was just surrounded by a sea of corn fields and soybean fields. So, it was a pretty slow place, and it was pretty boring. So, from my objective from about 15 onwards was to study foreign languages and to go see the world. Initially, I wasn't picky. I didn't care about where I was going to go, but I ended up after

trying a few other languages, I stuck with Chinese and ended up studying in China and then ended up studying in Taiwan. And the more I learned about some of these issues, the more fascinating it became. So, it ended up becoming a big part of my career.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:03:58 So how long did you say you lived in Taiwan for?
- Ian Easton:** 00:04:01 I lived in Taiwan from 2005 until 2010. So, all in all about four and a half years.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:04:08 So we're going to rely on that firsthand experience of yours and how it's informed your understanding of the island, its politics and its relationship with the United States and China, but I think it would help first if you gave listeners a short history of Taiwan. Most people, they've heard the name Taiwan. They may have I've heard the name Chinese Taipei, if they watch the Olympics.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:04:35 But I don't think most people have an understanding of its relationship to China. What is that relationship? When did Taiwan gain its independence? How do we think about its independence in the absence of international recognition? And how does that relate to US policy towards Taiwan?
- Ian Easton:** 00:04:57 Okay. So, that's a really big question. It's a really, really good question. Taiwan has a very abnormal history and I say abnormal, because it's a country that today very few other countries treat as a country and the way that happened is that it was a Japanese colony from 1895 until 1945. It was meant to be the site of the largest battle in World War II in the Pacific Ocean and it was a battle plan that was canceled actually. It was called Operation Causeway. And the reason no one's ever heard of Operation Causeway, but we have heard of Operation Overlord, for example and Operation Market Garden and some of these other operations is because it was canceled at the last minute when the joint chiefs of staff realized that it would be far too bloody and far too dangerous to carry out.
- Ian Easton:** 00:05:52 So US forces in the Pacific ended up landing on the Philippines and fighting there and then the forces that were supposed to actually invade Taiwan, at the time was called Formosa, they ended up landing on Okinawa instead and Taiwan was blockaded. It was heavily bombed and the Japanese forces that were there, there was about a hundred thousand Japanese troops garrisoning the island. They were bottled up and they couldn't get off and they couldn't create trouble for us forces elsewhere with the exception of the Kamikaze pilots which were based on Taiwan. Some of the Kamikaze pilots that hit our forces in Okinawa.
- Ian Easton:** 00:06:31 Well, at the end of the war, what happened was that the US then turned that island and actually Taiwan is more than just one island, it's one main island surrounded by a hundred or so smaller islands. Turned that over to the Republic of China government that was Chiang Kai-Shek's nationalist government in China, in the mainland of China because at the time the idea was that after World War II, there were going to be what President Roosevelt called World Policemen. The United States would be one. England and France would be others. The Soviet Union would be one and then the Republic of China, Chiang Kai-Shek's government and China would be another.
- Ian Easton:** 00:07:11 Each of those governments would act sort of like a police force and that served as the basis, of course, ultimately for the United Nations and the security

council there. Well, what happened is that in 1949 because while all this was going on, there was a civil war being carried out in China and it was extremely bloody and it was extremely brutal. And it was Chiang Kai-Shek's forces fighting against basically a rebel group of communists under Mao Zedong and it was a really tough insurgency. The communists, of course, were very tenacious and they fought this from 1927 all the way up until 1949.

- Ian Easton:** 00:07:59 For most of that war, most of the Chinese Civil War, the Chinese Communist Party and what later became the People's Liberation Army was actually on the back foot. They were losing throughout the entire war. Well, all that changed in late 1948, early 1949 when they were able to achieve a series of crushing victories and they were absolutely massive crushing victories where they swept across China and they drove Chiang Kai-Shek's forces back to Taiwan and back to Hainan Island to the south and to a bunch of other smaller islands off the coast of southeast china.
- Ian Easton:** 00:08:39 What ended up happening is a stalemate. The reason there's a stalemate of course was because in the summer of 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea and President Truman decided within days that basically he wasn't going to allow the Republic of Korea government to fall and also he was not going to allow the Republic of China government on Taiwan to fall. So, he ordered the seventh fleet into the Taiwan Strait to make sure Chinese communists couldn't invade Taiwan. At the same time of course, he ordered troops and he led the United Nations' response in defense of South Korea.
- Ian Easton:** 00:09:22 What this did is it created two of the most protracted stalemates in history and those two stalemates continue to this day and they're two of the most dangerous flash points to this day because they're both civil wars, both on the Korean peninsula and in Taiwan. Both civil wars that never concluded and they just became uneasy stalemates. Initially, going into it unlike the US approach to for example West Germany, East Germany, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, North Korea, South Korea, in this case, the United States government was told it could only recognize one of the two Chinas.
- Ian Easton:** 00:10:07 So initially it recognized Chiang Kai-Shek's china, the Republic of China on Taiwan and it de-recognized and it worked very hard internationally to delegitimize the communist government in China up until 1979 when the United States actually then suddenly closed its embassy in Taipei, opened a new embassy in Beijing, recognized the People's Republic of China government in mainland China, de-recognized the Republic of China government in Taiwan and started to act like Taiwan was no longer a legitimate country.
- Ian Easton:** 00:10:45 That's created this very, I don't want to say unusual. It's more than unusual. It's a bizarre foreign policy situation and that's one of the reasons why very few Americans have actually heard very much about Taiwan because we don't have troops there, we don't recognize Taiwan diplomatically and the US government actually to this day even though Taiwan has become a thriving democracy over the past two, three decades, to this day the United States government actually goes out of its way to pretend that Taiwan is not a real country or not a real government. So, it's a very strange history, but it's also I think very interesting because when you look at the modern history of US foreign policy, there's really nothing else like this.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:11:33 So that was a great summary. You also mention a number of those frozen conflicts or flashpoints or stalemates in the international community. Those are becoming increasingly important. Of course today, we're going to be discussing the Taiwan Strait and Asia, but across the world, in the absence of the credible threat of American intervention, many of these frozen conflicts could quickly become unfrozen or hot. And that of course has implications for global stability, has implications for trade routes, again, bringing us to the Taiwan Strait.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:12:11 In '79, when the carter administration recognized the Chinese Communist Party as the legitimate government of China and sort of delegitimized Taiwan in that sense. My first question, was that a requirement of Deng Xiaoping? Did he require that for an agreement with the United States? And then my second question is, "What can you tell me and our listeners about the Taiwan Relations Act which also was signed in 1979 and how has that informed meaningfully our relationship with Taiwan since?"
- Ian Easton:** 00:12:48 Well, to your first question it was. It was something that Deng Xiaoping and before him Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai pushed President Nixon and at the time, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on very hard. Now Nixon and Kissinger did not agree to that. What ended up happening after the visit in '72 when US-China rapprochement began was that the US opened up an official diplomatic post in Beijing, but it maintained its embassy in Taipei.
- Ian Easton:** 00:13:20 It wasn't until the Carter Administration that for a number of reasons most of them Geostrategic in nature because the United States felt it was starting to lose the Cold War and the balance of power was tipping dangerously in favor of the Soviet Union and something needed to be done. That is the moment when they decided to de-recognize Taiwan and to recognize the People's Republic of China in order to try to get China on our side to basically stand with them, arm them, make sure that they could put pressure on the southern flank of the Soviet Union in sort of a way of winning back some of the initiative in the Cold War which I think many strategists felt we were losing at the time. So, that's why that happened the way it did, as I understand it.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:14:15 In other words, it was part and parcel of our larger Cold War policy like everything else at the time?
- Ian Easton:** 00:14:22 It was absolutely driven by the fear of war breaking out in Europe especially in Germany near the Fulda Gap. That's where everybody expected to break out or perhaps in Berlin. And there was a sense going back to the late 1940s. There was always this sense that once conflict started, it could easily spiral out of control and neither superpower could then stop it. And it would escalate all the way up to nuclear warfare and chemical biological attacks and then ultimately the world would end.
- Ian Easton:** 00:14:59 So there was this fear I think that was sort of foundational for all the decisions that were made and that was probably one of the things that was driving decision-making when it came to Taiwan and what to do and how to balance more effectively against the Soviet Union. Because of course the relationship between communist China and communist Russia at the time, the USSR was very bad that from the 1960s, all the way through the 1970s, there was a tremendous amount of tension there. There was a very drastic split that happened in 1962.

- Ian Easton:** 00:15:38 And that led up to a mini border war where actually a lot of people died in 1969. So, there's a lot of tension there. There was a sense in China that they could be invaded by the Soviet Union at any time. The US saw this playing out and was on one hand worried that actually the Soviets could invade China and could take large chunks of it and then become even more powerful in terms of our strategic competition. It would weaken us even more.
- Ian Easton:** 00:16:10 But there's also a sense that there was an opportunity there that if the United States could reach out to the PRC, if we could arm them up, if we could partner with them and not only make sure they were not invaded by the Soviet Union, but also make sure they could put pressure on the Soviet Union from the Soviet Union's weak southern flank and that would take pressure off of our forces in Europe. I think there was a lot of strategic calculation that went into it and driven by the military requirements at the time.
- Ian Easton:** 00:16:39 There was also a sense I think by many that the two governments were equally illegitimate that because Taiwan was a military dictatorship at the time, the Republic of China government under Chiang Kai-Shek was a military dictatorship and that that wasn't all that different than the communist government in Mainland China. So, it didn't really matter who we recognized because they were from a moral perspective or an ethical perspective, they were about the same.
- Ian Easton:** 00:17:09 Ironically, what happened is after we de-recognized Taiwan, it wasn't long after that Taiwan started to reform itself politically and ultimately became a flourishing democracy. I mean, Taiwan today is one of the greatest democratic success stories on the planet. I mean, Taiwan is a very liberal democracy now, has a female president. Last year they legalized gay marriage. It's just a very open liberal democratic place. And I don't think anybody back in the 1970s or even the 1980s could have ever envisioned that happening the way it did.
- Ian Easton:** 00:17:50 Actually the same thing that happened with South Korea where in South Korea, you also had a military dictatorship that then evolved and became a very successful not only a successful economic story but also a successful political story. And as for your earlier question about the Taiwan Relations Act, what happened is when the United States government closed its embassy in Taipei and opened a new embassy in the PRC, in 1979, there was a tremendous backlash from the US congress. And the reason there was such a backlash partly it had to do with the China lobby which was the Chiang Kai-Shek's lobby in congress.
- Ian Easton:** 00:18:29 Of course, the ROC government had a lot of friends up on Capitol Hill, but also it had to do with this sense of Chiang Kai-Shek and his government may have been bad, but they were way better than communists, because of course anti-communist sentiment was very high back during the Cold War. And there was a sense that Chiang Kai-Shek's government had stood with us. In World War II, we had fought together against imperial Japan. We had stood together in the Cold War. There were a number of battles that were fought essentially shoulder to shoulder during the Cold War especially in the 1950s, and that there was this outcry from congress that how could we sell out this country that we had fought with and that we had helped build up, and that we had benefited strategically so much from over the past 20-30 years.

- Ian Easton:** 00:19:26 I think it's important to note that congress was surprised. Most of the US government was surprised. The announcement came very suddenly. It was developed in secret. There was a sense that the White House was not being transparent and of course that really struck a raw nerve after Watergate and the scandals of the early 1970s. So, the US congress ended up writing what became the Taiwan Relations Act. They passed it very quickly, it was veto-proof, and then President Carter signed it.
- Ian Easton:** 00:19:54 What the Taiwan Relations Act said, it became US Law 96-8 and it said that... And I'll just read a couple quotes from it, that I think that are very important for understanding our relationship with Taiwan and China today. It says that it's the policy of the United States government to, and I quote, "To provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character and to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion or intimidation that would jeopardize the security or the social or economic system of the people of Taiwan."
- Ian Easton:** 00:20:38 So what that meant because that's a very... Obviously, that's very legalistic language, but what that actually meant was that the United States government was bound by law to make sure that the US military would be ready to defend Taiwan not only from a potential invasion, but also from acts of coercion, threats to its economy, threats of subversion, which is something the Chinese Communist Party was very good at, and even a potential blockade, scenarios like that the US military and also the US government more broadly had to be ready to respond to threats to Taiwan.
- Ian Easton:** 00:21:18 It also said the US government had to help Taiwan maintain a credible self-defense posture. Well, arguably, Washington has not done a very good job in doing those things, but that's perhaps something we could talk about a little later. But anyways, that's the story of the Taiwan Relations Act and that's what it says, and that's what it asks of the United States government.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:21:44 So again, great summary and analysis. We're going to go back to the Taiwan Relations Act throughout this conversation. You also mentioned Taiwanese politics. That's clearly relevant. I wonder how much time I want to spend up front on it. But they recently in 2016 and in 2020 had two significant elections where the DPP was elected and now President Tsai Ing-wen is in power and she's been much more vocal about Taiwanese independence. And when I say independence, I don't mean formal independence, I mean cultural identity and there's a kind of a stronger, it seems nationalist message in her politics.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:22:23 And that seems to reflect Taiwanese society more broadly. In other words like Hong Kongers, have over time, most specifically the younger generations developed a much more native nationalist identity separate from China. I wonder how significant have those recent elections been because for most of Taiwan's history, it was the Nationalist Party, the party of Chiang Kai-Shek that that ruled Taiwan.
- Ian Easton:** 00:22:53 That's right. They've been incredibly significant. Without the DPP, and this very strong opposition party that's now become the incumbent party, Taiwan wouldn't be the flourishing democracy that it is today because before that, there was only one party and it was the KMT or the Nationalist Party of Chiang Kai-Shek and that was essentially a political party built along Leninist lines. It

was certainly not communist in nature, but it was organized along Leninist lines, and it was very authoritarian in nature.

- Ian Easton:** 00:23:26 It wasn't until the DPP emerged in the 1980s as an opposition party and started to push back that Taiwan started to really reform itself politically and that's something that accelerated in the 1990s, and then the DPP first won the office of the presidency in the year 2000 and held on to it for eight years although they did not have a majority in parliament, their Legislative Yuan, their version of congress, which meant that a lot of their policies were slowed down. Well, then in 2008, KMT candidate was elected president and the KMT had power again for eight years and they pushed a much more China-friendly policy.
- Ian Easton:** 00:24:11 It was one that that sought to emphasize the Chineseness of Taiwan, Taiwanese society, Taiwanese history and to do that in many ways including with the textbooks that students get in middle school and high school, and there's a tremendous pushback to that because the more the people of Taiwan learned, what it meant to be Chinese, the more they hated the idea. I saw this actually firsthand living in Taiwan because I did graduate school in Taiwan and I remember seminar discussions in 2006, 2007, 2008 with professors and with Taiwanese classmates who had never been to China. I had been to China.
- Ian Easton:** 00:24:55 I studied abroad in Shanghai and I traveled all the way from Beijing to the Sino-Pakistan border on Xinjiang. So, I had seen quite a bit of the country and I had a lot of stories to tell. None of my classmates actually believed me. They had never been to China, they had never met anybody from China, they just had this sort of romanticized idea of what it was like. When I told them about the pollution, about the corruption, about the crackdown on human rights and about a lot of the social problems that I witnessed when I was there, it was very hard for them to believe.
- Ian Easton:** 00:25:28 Well, after the KMT came back into power, this was President Ma Ying-jeou at the time in 2008. He really opened up the gates and to greater cross-strait relations. So, there was a flood of business delegations and tourists visiting Taiwan from the PRC. Of course, they had not only an economic and cultural end goal in mind, but also very political. So, everything became very political as you might imagine in a situation like this because of course their objective was to actually take over Taiwan. And they were very pushy.
- Ian Easton:** 00:26:07 The more people in Taiwan got to know people from the PRC, the more tourist groups they were exposed to, the more political delegations they saw come over and the more they saw this aggressive push to undermine Taiwan's sovereignty, the less they liked it. There was a series of events that culminated in the 2016 election where the DPP swept back into power not only winning the presidency, but also winning a majority in parliament.
- Ian Easton:** 00:26:40 After four years of being in office, then President Tsai was re-elected in January of this year in 2020 and also just won a crushing victory in parliament as well. I think one of the reasons that happened is because people in Taiwan have seen what the Chinese Communist Party has done to Hong Kong. They've also seen what's happened in Xinjiang and other places in the PRC. It's really deepened their distrust for any promises made by the government in Beijing. And it's really, I think, instilled in them a sense that Taiwan is nothing like China, that they are an independent country, that their government has not had any

administrative control over China, over the PRC for 70 years and the PRC government has not had any administrative control over Taiwan and its island holdings for 70 years and that it really should stay that way and that the world should recognize Taiwan as an independent sovereign country.

- Ian Easton:** 00:27:43 So I think that there's this growing sense of nationalism and patriotism on Taiwan in a growing sense that their culture, that their story, that their history is really unique and really different than that of the PRC, and that their future is going to be a future that they decide for themselves that they're not going to allow them their government to be coerced. They're not going to compromise, they're not going to surrender, that they're going to fight for the freedom and democracy that they've won and that they hope the United States and other countries will stand with them. So, I think that's where we are today.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:28:19 Is the CCPs sort of standing offer to Taiwan something similar to what they've offered Hong Kong, granted Hong Kong is actually territorially part of China in a much clearer way. But it is sort of a one country, two systems type approach, right? I mean, how much of it is looking at Hong Kong and saying, "Well, this was what we were sort of hoping for in the best case scenario is what they were offering Hong Kong but that's really not..." It looks like we're not going to really be able to get that and so public opinion has changed. That's kind of one question. And maybe you can fold that into the larger question about the DPP and if its election and public opinion in Taiwan, the change in public opinion have made the Chinese Communist Party feel like their hope of unifying China with Taiwan peacefully feels less likely than ever to happen.
- Ian Easton:** 00:29:15 Those are very, very good questions. The big difference between Hong Kong and Taiwan. Of course, that that Hong Kong was never a sovereign independent country. Hong Kong was a colony of the British empire and then the British turned it back over to the People's Republic of China in 1997. So, it stayed, basically a state colony of the foreign power. So, Hong Kong has actually never enjoyed true freedom and sovereignty that the people of Hong Kong have never been able to decide for themselves what their government should look like and what their future should be.
- Ian Easton:** 00:29:53 Now, the narrative which turned out to be a false narrative from Beijing was that the people of Hong Kong would be able to maintain the freedoms that the British gave them. So, freedom of the press for example and that they would be autonomous, that they would be treated differently legally and politically and economically and otherwise from the rest of the People's Republic of China. And at the same time, the government Beijing told Taiwan that they could have a similar deal that Taiwan would have to agree to surrender its sovereignty as an independent country, which again, it has been since Chiang Kai-Shek's government moved there in late 1949.
- Ian Easton:** 00:30:41 But even though they would lose that, the international standing or the international freedom of action that they have, that they would still be able to maintain some of their basic freedoms and that you would have a one country, two government scenario. Well, of course for Taiwan that was not appealing at all because Taiwan had exercised total independence and sovereignty. I mean, Taiwan has its own military, its own foreign ministry. It is a country and it has acted just like a country for 70 years. Taiwan had a seat at the United Nations for about 30 years.

Ian Easton: 00:31:20 It wasn't until 1979 that it... Well, actually, they lost their seat at the UN in the early 1970s then they lost support from the United States diplomatically in 1979. But even after that, they were able to maintain a few dozen diplomatic allies. These tended to be smaller countries. For example, the Vatican, countries in Central America.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:31:41 The Vatican is the only sovereign territory in Europe that actually recognizes Taiwan. Is that right?

Ian Easton: 00:31:46 Yes, that's right. The Vatican is the only country in Europe to recognize Taiwan. So, what China is asking Taiwan now is to surrender that, to surrender all freedom, all sovereignty and just to trust that the Chinese communist party will treat Taiwan fairly as some kind of a semi-autonomous, basically a colony or province of the People's Republic of China. Well, in Taiwan, they've seen what that has meant for Hong Kong. They've also seen what it's meant for Tibet. Tibet is also supposed to be a semi-autonomous part of the People's Republic of China. Xinjiang is also meant to be autonomous the way Muslim areas in Ningxia province for example is also meant to be semi-autonomous.

Ian Easton: 00:32:37 Well, if you visit some of those places in China, what you'll see is that not only are they not autonomous in any way shape or form, those areas are actually repressed to a far greater degree than any other place in China. I mean, you walk around Xinjiang or Ningxia for example, even back in 2004 when I was there, you could see them bulldozing mosques, and you could see them riding around in military-style armored personnel vehicles with troops carrying machine guns and bazookas. It was very oppressive. You could tell you were in a police state.

Ian Easton: 00:33:15 It didn't feel that way in Shanghai or Beijing for example or in Chongqing but you definitely felt that way out there. I don't think anybody in Taiwan now is under any illusion of what it would mean for them to actually accept some kind of compromise with Beijing and to allow their fate to start to mirror the fate of Hong Kong because what that would mean for Taiwan would be obviously be very dire.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:33:42 Well, that also kind of raises the question of what sort of illusion were US policy makers under in the early 2000s even in, you could say in the 1990s, but certainly by the time they were bulldozing mosques as you say and things in Xinjiang have gotten much worse. I mean, the New York Times published those leaked internal Chinese documents about this time last year and many reports have come out since about concentration camps and reports of forced organ harvesting. It's difficult to really comprehend what you're reading about that region. I mean, how does a regular person wrap his or her mind around the reports that are coming out of Xinjiang?

Ian Easton: 00:34:26 Well, you can't.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:34:29 I don't really want to reach for analogies and metaphors because they're always imperfect, and it's so easy to reach for this one, but I'm going to reach for it anyway. How similar is this to what was going on in Nazi Germany prior to 1938?

Ian Easton: 00:34:46 Well, I think it's very similar. I think that's as you say, it's an imperfect analogy but it's the closest that we have. The democracies of the world are reacting almost exactly the same as they did back in the late 1930s. Almost to a T that here we have a dictatorship, which is whether it's a communist dictatorship or a fascist dictatorship that is engaging in massive human rights atrocities, but all of these neighbors are so afraid of being attacked by it and they're so afraid of losing their economic linkages because Nazi Germany in the 1930s was an economic powerhouse. They had a lot of influence on the world stage. I mean, they hosted the Olympics in the 1930s for example.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:35:34 Yeah. And they were the first host nation to broadcast the Olympics on television.

Ian Easton: 00:35:39 They were. They were known for being very technologically advanced, very scientifically advanced. I mean, Albert Einstein came from Germany, right? He defected essentially to the United States from Nazi Germany. Of course, he was one of the most brilliant men on the planet at the time. It's very possible that today some of the most brilliant minds in the world live in the People's Republic of China and certainly their trade and economic policies have been absolutely stunning.

Ian Easton: 00:36:09 They have very much impressed Wall Street. They've impressed Silicon Valley. They've impressed entrepreneurs and economists to the world over and everyone is afraid of losing their access to China, to the talent that's there, to the potential opportunity that's there. So, they've really turned a blind eye to this massive human rights atrocity that is unfolding before us and they've actually allowed their governments to stay silent, and they've encouraged their governments to stay silent.

Ian Easton: 00:36:44 So there's this moral corruption that has taken place there and at the same time, there's also fear. Everybody that deals with China is afraid of a war breaking out with China. Nobody wants to get attacked. India doesn't want to be attacked, Japan doesn't want to be attacked. Taiwan doesn't want to be attacked and we of course don't want to be attacked. Then there are threats that are very vocal, they're very regular and they're very sinister that if we don't do what the Chinese Communist Party wants us to do, if we don't work hard to maintain a good relationship with Beijing, if we're too critical of them, then they could attack us.

Ian Easton: 00:37:22 So I think that's also had a sort of a silencing effect on people's head, that mix of positive and negative incentives, that type of coercion and it's proved remarkably effective. And it's really chilling to see how this is playing itself out.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:37:38 Well, that's one thing I want to ask you about, which is that not just with Taiwan of course, we're here to talk about Taiwan and the PLA has stepped up operations in the strait and not just with Taiwan though, again, with the Philippines, with Japan, with India, they seem to be pushing boundaries, pushing borders, testing limits, testing internationally recognized zones. And on top of that, I saw a recent report that came out by the Pentagon that says that China now has the largest navy, larger navy than the United States, which I think will shock most people. I assume that doesn't include blue water navy, correct?

Ian Easton: 00:38:19 No. Actually, what's even more shocking is it includes both blue water navy and it's a green water navy. So, not only is their gray whole navy, their traditional navy larger in terms of number of ships than the United States navy, they have about 350 and we have less than 300, about 290. Their coast guard is way bigger than our coast guard or any other coast guard in the world as well. And they also have a third branch, and that's their maritime militia. So, all of the fishing boats, transport ships, ferries, everything that goes to sea, that's 50 tons or above is all registered with the military.

Ian Easton: 00:38:59 Many of those ship captains and the crews actually get military training and we've seen them be used in the South China Sea, in the East China Sea and now also in the Taiwan Strait to actually serve as a civilianized arm of the military because they don't wear uniforms. Of course, in many cases, these are fishing boats, but they're actually under-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:39:23 Like the Little Green Men of Crimea.

Ian Easton: 00:39:27 Yeah, the Little Green Men of Crimea in the South China is that often they're now called the Little Blue Men and Professor Andrew Erickson for example, the naval war college has done some fantastic research on this and writing on it. He was the first to expose it. And when you read some of that, it's just incredible. It's incredible to think that the United States government has, until recently, stood by and done very little as China built up the largest navy on the planet and the largest coast guard on the planet which it's using to harass all of its neighbors and push out the boundaries of its maritime territory. And then also to militarize its fishing fleet and its civilian transport fleet.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:40:07 Well, that was one of the examples I was going to ask you about which was the case of Scarborough Shoal in 2012, which was a case where Chinese commercial vessels were basically fishing in Filipino waters. And that really went undefended or unresponded to by the US, and now, as I understand the Chinese navy basically occupies that territory.

Ian Easton: 00:40:29 Yeah, that's correct. And in fact it's even worse than that. What happened is the United States government brokered a deal between our ally, the government in the Philippines and the People's Republic of China brokered a deal, set a time and place for the standoff to end for the navies of China and the Philippines to leave Scarborough shoal and the government in the Philippines actually honored the deal and the Chinese did it, they stayed and they occupied it. And when they did that, when they broke the deal, the US did nothing and just allowed them to take it over. So, really they've maintained that control to this day and it's really put a lot of stress on the US relationship with the Philippines.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:41:18 I think we've done a good job of setting a background here on giving people a sense of both the history and the significance, and severity of the issue here. I think it'd be a good time to pivot into a more specific conversation about invasion scenarios of Taiwan, pretty much what your book describes and also rope in at all times the United States and its Asian partners into these conversations to think about how all of these different pieces interconnect. Because again, the point about the navy, I was shocked to read that.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:41:53 I mean, I knew that China had made enormous progress in all sorts of different areas of both conventional and unconventional warfare and in building its

military capabilities, but that really was a bit of a shock to me. Of course, they... What's that saying in military circles? Quantity has equality all its own. But I wonder also to what degree that's reflective of navy capability. The Chinese are adept and have been adept at quantity. I mean, that's kind of how they built their industrial machine.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:42:29 But let's talk about what's been going on in the Taiwan Strait and with Taiwan and China in recent years in particular because it seems that as we talked about the aggression towards Taiwan has escalated as part of a larger testing of boundaries on the part of the CCP, how real is the prospect of an invasion of Taiwan today?

Ian Easton: 00:42:52 Well, I don't think it's going to happen today and I don't think it's going to happen tomorrow, but I do think the risk is very real that it will happen in our lifetime and it could happen in the foreseeable future, the near future. I mean, this could happen in the next five years that we are watching China build up its military for this precise operation. And we know that because you can read Chinese military studies, the People's Liberation Army's doctrinal studies, the course books that they've written for their National Defense University and their army command academies and their space command academies and their naval command academies, and all the technical studies they've done going back over the past several decades.

Ian Easton: 00:43:38 They've always been focused like a laser beam on Taiwan. I mean it's the number one mission of the People's Liberation Army is to invade and occupy Taiwan and to do it in a way that either deters the United States and other countries from coming to Taiwan's defense or defeats them in the event that deterrence fails. So, you can go back and you can read what they've written and then you can watch what they've actually done about it, and it's amazing.

Ian Easton: 00:44:04 They have engaged in an absolutely stunning military build-up and they've done it in a way that is directly relevant for a future invasion operation of Taiwan. And they've also done it in a way that has minimized international reaction. So, Taiwan has not done very much to change its defensive posture. The United States has not done very much to change its defensive posture. Japan which also has a tremendous stake in the outcome of this issue has not done very much to change its posture that all the democracies are essentially standing still.

Ian Easton: 00:44:45 We're still maintaining the forces that we had in the region 20 years ago. Now, they're getting some updates so the old F-16s and F-15s in Japan are now becoming F-22s and F-35. The new stealth fighter, fifth generation fighter. But the numbers are about the same. The old ships that we have in the seventh fleet which is based in Tokyo Bay. We still have the same number of ships are getting some updates, but it's basically the same fleet that we've always had. The same is true for Taiwan that they're updating their army, they're updating their navy, they're updating their air force, but they're not growing it.

Ian Easton: 00:45:23 In some ways, they're shrinking it over time. And so the reaction from the democracies has been pretty subdued when you look at this massive buildup that's going on across the Taiwan Strait. And it's becoming increasingly clear that Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party do actually intend to do what they say and what they've long said they were going to do and that's to actually take Taiwan. And if they can't do it through coercion, if they can't do it through

economic infiltration and through acts of covert action, that they'll do it through use of armed force and full-out invasion. Now, that the balance of power has shifted so significantly in China's favor, there really is an increasing risk that that is going to attempt tragedy.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:46:15 You talked about this in the book as well, but I also read another report, I think it was about a year ago by Robert Work and Greg Grant, and it wasn't focused on Taiwan. Among other things, the missile capabilities that the CCP has invested in or the PLA is invested in or both. I don't know how you would... That's the difficult thing about talking about China. It doesn't fit into the normal buckets that we think about when we think about western policy or even the commercial sector and its relationship to the government.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:46:50 Can you talk to me a little bit about that specifically about the investments they've made in missile technology? How significant is that? Because to my understanding, the decision to invest so heavily in upgrading their missile systems and capabilities was in direct response to the United States presence in the region And it's been done with the goal of blunting the US's ability to project power in the South China Sea and that feeds directly into any conflict with Taiwan.
- Ian Easton:** 00:47:20 It does. So, what happened toward the end of the Cold War in 1987 was the United States and the Soviet Union signed the INF Treaty, the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty. And what it said was that ballistic missiles and land-based cruise missiles of a certain range, so over I believe it was 300 miles in range between 300 and 500 miles in range, that those were destabilizing. And all the war games that we ran, all the war games that the Soviet Union ran saw that those were destabilizing because when you have missiles of that type, whether they're armed with nuclear weapons or not, you can't tell that of course on radar.
- Ian Easton:** 00:48:06 So you have to assume that they are, that there's so little warning time that the other side has, that things can very quickly escalate out of control. So, it was actually one of the greatest things that came out of the Cold War was that the United States and the soviet union both agreed to dismantle their INF applicable missile forces and they did. It was very good for strategic stability in Europe.
- Ian Easton:** 00:48:37 Now, after the Cold War was over, it wasn't very long before the People's Republic of China saw that this was going on and they saw an opportunity and they seized upon it that in the early 1990s, they stood up their first ballistic missile force of short-range ballistic missiles, the DF-11 and then shortly thereafter the DF-15. Actually, it could be the other way around. I forget if it was the DF-11 and the DF-15 that came out first. But what happened is they saw an opportunity there. They saw that ballistic missiles and then land-based cruise missiles were very effective tools of coercion that they scared people and that china was not limited by international law the way the United States and the Soviets and then later actually all the former soviet countries including Russia maintained their commitment under the INF Treaty.
- Ian Easton:** 00:49:33 China saw that they had no commitment and then they could build up a massive force of these offensive destabilizing missiles and that would give them a very significant advantage over the United States and over Taiwan in any future scenario, and it has. It has significantly shifted the balance of power in China's

direction and it's done so in a way that's very destabilizing because today, we have very large air force bases in Guam, Anderson Air Force base and also in Okinawa, at Kadena which is our largest air force base on foreign soil, and they are under that threat umbrella. And at any time, with very little warning China could shower them with ballistic missiles and with land-based cruise missiles. They could do the same of course to Taiwan's air bases.

- Ian Easton:** 00:50:23 Well, once you have your air bases pummeled by ballistic missiles and cruise missiles and now we're going into an era of attack drones and swarming attack drones with very long ranges, and we're also going into area of hypersonic missiles, which are even faster so they go five, 10 times-
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:50:41 The Russians have been developing those as well, right?
- Ian Easton:** 00:50:43 Yeah, absolutely.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:50:44 In fact, I think they're on the frontier of that development. They're ahead of even the People's Republic of China now?
- Ian Easton:** 00:50:51 Well, I don't know. I think it's difficult without having access to satellite imagery and signals intelligence to watch some of the tests is tough to say who's ahead. But certainly Russia has invested heavily in that. And actually Russia over the past 20 years has done a lot of backsliding on its INF Treaty commitments which is why recently Washington announced that it was no longer going to be beholden to the INF Treaty that no longer had any force because Russia had broken all of his treaty commitments. The US had seen that that China was not beholden to it and so we were only going to be at a deeper and deeper disadvantage over time if we did not ourselves start to develop feeder missiles. So, those are the ballistic missiles and the land-based cruise missiles that have those ranges that are short, medium, and intermediate ranges. So, we actually got out of it because of that.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:51:49 So I also have some philosophical questions I want to ask you, but I'm going to hold off on them. Maybe we'll get into them in the overtime, but they're related to why is this happening? Is this just an inevitable result of a kind of a realist view of foreign policy that as these countries rise economically. Well, maybe not the case with Russia, but certainly with China that it's just inevitable that they're going to test these boundaries and they're going to want to assert themselves.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:52:15 But let's hold off on that one. I want to ask you one more question before we switch into the overtime where I really do want to continue discussing the subject of your book. On the point about Taiwan and invasion scenarios and this and that, I mean when I said today I didn't really mean this very moment, but some of the estimates I've seen have been that sometime in the next 10 years, I think it's actually... Maybe I'm thinking of --
- Ian Easton:** 00:52:44 Captain Fanell.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:52:45 Capitan Fanell. The former director of intelligence and information operations for the US Pacific Fleet. He says that between 2020 and 2030 is the riskiest time for a breakout of conflict in the South China Sea. And that has something to do with 2049. So, you're probably the best person to point me to that. But what

would be some early indicators for knowing when we might be getting close to such an event?

- Ian Easton:** 00:53:10 Well, Demetri, what I worry about right now is that we're already starting to see some of those early indicators. So, just this past weekend there was an unannounced launch of two satellites from China. That follows on an incident not long ago just a few weeks ago where they did that as well. So, we're starting to see these launches of intelligence gathering satellites, reconnaissance satellites from China that were unannounced.
- Ian Easton:** 00:53:41 Generally before a satellite launch, the government will announce a closure area for aircraft to avoid. There'll be notices that are posted. When they start to do satellite launches that are secret, that are unannounced and then it's just a surprise for everybody when they happen, and you can tell that those are reconnaissance satellites, that's a warning sign. Another warning sign is when you have hyper nationalistic propaganda messages, really bloody minded, really aggressive propaganda messages coming from the central propaganda department of the Chinese Communist Party directed at Taiwan. That's something that we've also seen recently where they've said that the Taiwan Strait Media Line no longer applies to Taiwan-
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:54:28 Right, I saw that.
- Ian Easton:** 00:54:29 ... Strait Center Line no longer applies. They've threatened to kill the president of Taiwan. They've said that they would wipe her out. So that they're making these really bombastic, really radical statements of policy and the messaging has been really remarkable. It's very different than what you would have seen just a year ago. We've also seen a lot of air and maritime activity around Taiwan. We've seen reports of increased intelligence collection against Taiwan, which is also what you would expect to see happen before a crisis or even a full-on invasion.
- Ian Easton:** 00:55:08 We've also seen a lot of activity with China's maritime militia. So, a lot of Taiwan's outer islands and some of those small islands that they have just off the coast of the PRC are being harassed now by Chinese maritime militia. Jinmen for example and more recently Matsu. That's also something that you would start to expect before a major crisis breaks out. So, a lot is going on now. There's also a widespread militarization of Chinese society. There's a mobilization of private industry or what people previously thought of as private companies.
- Ian Easton:** 00:55:48 Even though they're in many ways controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, it's becoming even more clear now that those are not private companies that they serve not only the Chinese Communist Party itself politically for political ends, but they also serve the People's Liberation Army for military ends. So, there's this massive militarization of Chinese society that we're seeing right now. What we have not yet seen are acts of sabotage directed at Taiwan. There have been some reports of smuggling, gun smuggling and other things that you might expect to see before an armed attack, but happily so far there have been no assassination attempts of any of the key leaders. There's been no abductions.

- Ian Easton:** 00:56:33 There have been no riots in the streets of Taiwan. There have been no cyber-attacks or at least no very successful overt cyber-attacks that knocked out the power grid or the banking system for example. There have been no cuttings of the telecommunication cables that link Taiwan to the United States and other countries for example. These are some of the other things that you would expect to see in the run-up to war. You'd also expect to see reservists be mobilized in China. You'd expect to see very large assemblies of amphibious assault craft and other transport vessels in Xiamen and Fujou, and other port cities across from Taiwan.
- Ian Easton:** 00:57:14 To my knowledge that has not happened yet. So, there's still reason to think that an invasion is not coming tomorrow and it's not coming the day after that, but there are certainly some worrying signs that we are seeing and there's good reason for much greater vigilance on the part of Washington, and I think on the part of Taiwan. Of course, in Japan and other countries in the region because there are some of the warning signs that are already there. We're starting to already see this play out, and I think that's something we need to keep tracking.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:57:49 And of course, that doesn't take into account the possibility of a mistake, something can happen that can lead to an invasion or lead to war that wasn't intended. And that kind of leads us to a question about the different types of policies. One is how has policy towards China and Taiwan shifted under the Trump administration. It's something we didn't have a chance to talk about yet, but I want to ask you in the overtime. How it might change under a Biden administration as we're a month away from a presidential election.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:58:17 I mean, a lot of things. Something else that just came to my mind is that Richard Haas and David Sacks had recently wrote an opinion piece for Foreign Affairs Magazine that got a lot of intellectual blow back from people that disagreed with Haas and Sacks and it had to do with this idea of strategic clarity versus strategic ambiguity. And what we've had in the Taiwan Strait all of these years is strategic ambiguity purposefully so. And so I'd like to ask you about that and whether you think that they made a good case for a US security guarantee for Taiwan. If that's something that you think would actually bring more stability to the region or if it would actually potentially ignite a breakout in hostilities.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:58:56 For anyone who is new to the program, Hidden Forces is listener supported. If you want access to the second hour of my conversation with Ian as well as the transcript and rundown to this episode and every other episode we've ever done, head over to patreon.com/hiddenforces. There's also a link in the summary page to this episode with instructions on how to connect the overtime feed to your phone so that you can listen to these extra discussions just like you listen to the regular podcast. Ian, stick around. We're going to move the second half of our conversation into the subscriber over time.
- Ian Easton:** 00:59:31 Will do.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:59:33 Today's episode of Hidden Forces was recorded in New York City. For more information about this week's episode or if you want easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you want access to overtime segments, episode transcripts, and show rundowns full of links and detailed information related to each and every

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Demetri Kofinas:

01:00:10

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