

# The Chips Are Down

With our computers frozen, would the U.S. still be a superpower?  
China intends to find out.

By **Claude Salhani**

IN THIS GALAXY, in the not too distant future...

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demanded that the U.S. military focus its attention—and much of its research and development—on how best to respond to low-tech threats such as primitive improvised explosive devices. While the IEDs proved to be deadly for the troops of the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq—the majority of casualties suffered were from exploding roadside bombs—the long-term effect they had on the American military was far more consequential. The real impact was felt only a few years later when the United States became involved in its next major conflict—with China.

The two wars in the Middle East were, from a scientific perspective, low-tech engagements in which conventional military forces fought urban guerrillas. Following a sweeping victory that brought the U.S. military from the Kuwaiti border right up to Baghdad and beyond in record time, the administration believed that victory had been attained and prematurely declared the end of major combat operations. As we were to find out, this was far from the case. American soldiers and Marines—and the 60,000-odd contract workers supporting the U.S. military—soon had to grapple with a new problem: roadside bombs detonated by remote control. Lethal as they were, these homemade gadgets were rudimentary. They were relatively easy to assemble, hide, trans-

port, place along the roads where coalition troops were bound to pass by, and detonate remotely. At one point, U.S. soldiers found that a simple remote control sold with \$50 battery-operated toy cars at Radio Shack allowed American troops to preempt the IEDs by detonating the insurgents' bombs ahead of American convoys.

As the casualty toll from the IEDs began to grow, the military focused on countermeasures. Resources from the military's own research groups and defense contractors across the country became absorbed by the problem. As could be expected, the resistance and the *jihadi* fighters answered by creating more sophisticated bombs, for example, building the casing out of plastic to avoid detection by mine sweepers. This only prompted the military to keep looking for ways to thwart newer generations of IEDs. And the deadly cycle continued until the end of the war in October 2017—or at least the end of the war for the United States.

American engagement in Iraq officially ended when a detachment of Navy Seals—the last group of U.S. Special Forces—were extracted out of Anbar Province in the middle of the night. Al-Qaeda fighters, having learned from an informer of the U.S. evacuation plan, attempted to ambush them. They began firing on the 16 Seals—divided into two teams of eight—as they hooked harnesses onto cables attached to the underbellies of two large CH-47 Sea

Knight Marine helicopters. The gunmen missed the Seals for the most part. Three Marine Cobra attack helicopters providing cover fire quickly silenced the attackers.

Between the time the first American soldier set foot on Iraqi soil in 2003 and the last of the Navy Seals commandos left the country in 2017, and while the U.S. military remained preoccupied in countering threats emanating from low-tech devices in an asymmetrical war, halfway around the globe the Chinese did not remain idle. Aware that the day would come when the People's Liberation Army might have to face the American Army in battle, China began looking toward the place that conflict might be conducted. Their conclusion: the one who controlled space was guaranteed victory.

The Chinese leadership was fully aware that the PLA could never stand up to the U.S. military in a conventional war, despite China's superior number of troops—one million under arms. The U.S. war machine is made up of the most fantastic pieces of armament ever incorporated into any fighting force in the history of man.

From the main battle tank, the Abrams M1A1, to Cobra attack helicopters, to Marine vertical take-off and landing Harrier jump jets, to the U.S. Air Force's crown jewel, the B1 stealth bomber, to the magnificent armadas that the U.S. Navy can deploy with its nuclear powered aircraft carriers, attack

submarines, and destroyers anywhere on the face of the globe, the Chinese military leadership had reason to worry.

Its war planners projected that the day would come when they would have to face America's military in a standoff, most likely over the island of Taiwan, seen by China as a breakaway province and considered by the United States to be a friend and ally. They began to plan accordingly.

While the U.S. military was occupied developing simple solutions to counter low-tech threats in the Middle East, Beijing quietly went about developing high-tech systems to place aboard dozens of "communication" satellites that were developed, tested, and launched into space. Today, the Chinese have 56 satellites in space.

On Jan. 11, 2007, a missile was launched from the Chinese mainland to an altitude of 537 miles, slamming straight into its target—an obsolete Chinese weather satellite. The target was instantly destroyed, reportedly producing almost 900 trackable pieces of space debris. At that time, the U.S. military was far too preoccupied with what was happening in Iraq to worry about Chinese missiles. It proved to be an oversight—a major one.

China made good use of this oblivion. Along with its space-launched missile defense initiative, the Chinese busied themselves with finding ways to immobilize America's far superior tanks, warplanes, and battleships and render the U.S. military's computers and their communication and command-and-control systems useless. The Chinese knew that time was limited and that once the U.S. began to disengage from Iraq and Afghanistan, its military would regroup and reassess new threats and move to counter them.

The conflict began pretty much like most conflicts do: gradual escalation and exchanges of strongly worded commu-

niqués, culminating with threats, followed by military action.

Beijing announced that if the newly elected government in Taiwan declared independence, China would intervene militarily. The United States responded by dispatching two carrier task forces attached to the *USS Abraham Lincoln* and the *USS Ronald Reagan*. Besides the usual high-tech armament, including ship-to-shore missiles, ship-to-air missiles, and ship-to-ship missiles, and 400-odd warplanes aboard the carriers, the combined task force also included two Battalion Landing Teams, some 4,000 Marines.

The Chinese had nowhere near as many warships, planes, or tanks, but they had 350,000 men aboard transport ships—and they had a secret weapon in orbit.

As the Chinese expeditionary force approached Taiwan, they crossed an imaginary red line drawn across a Pentagon map, breaching the point American generals estimated would be one from which the Chinese would not turn back.

From his command post aboard the *USS Ronald Reagan*, Adm. Anthony S. Samuelson picked up a secure telephone connecting him directly to the Pentagon and to the office of the secretary of defense. The secretary picked up on the first ring.

"Tell me it's good news, admiral."

"Wish I could, sir. They are now in firing range and are not about to turn around. It looks like this is it."

The secretary of defense asked the admiral to stand by. He picked up a burgundy phone on his desk.

The president answered instantly. "Madame President," said the secretary, "You must order the attack. If we are to proceed, it must be now."

The president scanned the room, moving her eyes around the Oval Office where her national security advisers were gathered. Each in turn nodded his

head, indicating a silent "yes." The president of the United States put the phone to her ear and told her secretary of defense to proceed. With a heavy heart, Chelsea Clinton placed the receiver back in its cradle.

As the first Chinese soldier set foot on the beaches of Taiwan, the order was received from Adm. Samuelson's headquarters to open fire.

Minutes before the order was given, some 300 miles up in space, a Chinese scientific satellite released a burst of electro-magnetic energy aimed at American and Taiwanese forces. Other similar satellites positioned strategically around the Earth released a number of similar bursts directed at strategic U.S. missile silos in the continental United States, Korea, and Australia.

Total confusion followed. Not one order issued electronically by U.S. command-and-control centers reached its target. Missiles fired from the ships of the Seventh Fleet went straight into space and exploded harmlessly above the earth. The Abrams M1A1 tanks started to turn around in circles like demented prehistoric dogs trying to bite their tails. The few planes that managed to take off from the carriers crashed into the South China Sea. Search-and-rescue helicopters were unable to even start their engines.

The Chinese were able to walk ashore and take Taiwan without firing a single shot.

Thankfully, the battle for Taiwan unfolded only in this author's imagination. But the scenario is not entirely outside the realm of possibility. It is time to finish the war in Iraq and hand the Iraqis responsibility for their land and their own future. It is also time to look ahead. Our competitors are. ■

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# Can We Win the Ideological War?

Asked during World War II why the British continued to fight so ferociously, Churchill is said to have snorted, “If we stop, you’ll find out.”

The question arises in the war on terror: we know who the main enemy is, al-Qaeda, the men and movement responsible for 9/11, but what are they fighting for? What is their war all about?

A year ago, in Salt Lake City, President Bush, addressing the American Legion, sought to define the war from his perspective: “The war we fight today is more than a military conflict; it is the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century. On one side are those who believe in the values of freedom and moderation—the right of all people to speak, and worship, and live in liberty. And on the other side are those driven by the values of tyranny and extremism—the right of a self-appointed few to impose their fanatical views on all the rest.”

Certainly terrorists who massacre innocents are fanatics. Certainly, the caliphate bin Laden’s acolytes would establish would be tyrannical. But if the enemy were only a cabal of terrorists, hell-bent on establishing a tyranny, they would not be on the verge of expelling us from Iraq and perhaps from Afghanistan.

Why are we losing the war if President Bush has correctly defined the stakes in this “ideological struggle”?

One reason is that the true goals of bin Laden, the insurgents in Iraq, and the Taliban are not so abstract as those of Mr. Bush. They are concrete, understandable, realizable, and appealing to millions.

In his declaration of war on the United States, bin Laden listed three goals: expel U.S. forces from the sacred

soil of Saudi Arabia, stop the persecution of innocent Iraqis through U.S.-UN sanctions, and end the Israeli repression and dispossession of the Palestinian people.

Not only do these goals have broad appeal to Arab peoples, bin Laden has achieved victory in the first. After 9/11, U.S. forces were pulled out of Saudi Arabia at the request of the king.

And while Bush calls this an ideological struggle, the enemy has allied itself with some very powerful ideas. As did Mao and Ho Chi Minh, our enemy has captured the flag of nationalism: We fight to get your troops off our land! We fight to get your hooks out of our government! Leave us to rule ourselves!

More importantly, our enemy has rooted his cause in a 1,400-year-old religion that has 1.2 billion adherents, has survived crusades, invasions and occupations, and is growing again in militancy and converts

Our enemy, be it Shia or Sunni in Iraq or the Taliban in Afghanistan, claims to be fighting for a rule of law, Sharia, sanctioned by the Koran, and a form of government the Prophet mandates for Islamic peoples. And that is not some secular-liberal, do-your-own-thing democracy.

As for the tactics the enemy uses, decent Muslims the world over are said to be growing disgusted with the slaughter by suicide bombers of men, women, and children.

But are these not the tactics the French maquis and Italian and Yugoslav partisans used on the Nazis and their

collaborators? Was this not the way Israelis expelled the British, the Algerians expelled the French, the Afghans expelled the Soviets, the ANC overthrew apartheid, and Hezbollah drove the IDF out of Lebanon?

Clausewitz would understand: terrorism is the extension of Islamist politics by other means.

If we know what al-Qaeda is fighting for, what exactly are we fighting for? Taking the president literally, we are fighting for the right of Islamic peoples “to speak, and worship, and live in liberty.”

Here we come to our dilemma. Devout Muslims in Islamic lands do not believe people should be free to blaspheme or insult the Prophet. They do not believe all religions are equal or should be treated equally. They do not believe Christians should be free to preach in their lands. The punishment for those who do, and for those who convert from Islam in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia as well as Iran, is death.

Moreover, in every Middle East country, Islamic parties have broadening support. In free elections in Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and Iran, Islamists made gains or racked up victories. In Turkey, a moderate Islamic party just won national power.

It is Western secularism that is in retreat. It is our friends in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, the Gulf states, and Israel who seem most apprehensive about any more elections among the Arab masses. The Islamists seem to welcome them—and to succeed in them.

Should U.S. soldiers die for democracy in the Islamic world, when democracy may produce victory for the political progeny of the Muslim Brotherhood? Is that worth the lives of America’s young? ■