

# TOM CLANCY DEFENSE PROTOCOL

## Prologue

*Chaoyang Park Plaza Apartments*

*Chaoyang District*

*Beijing, China*

*0833 Local Time*

Something was wrong.

Cheng Kai, Minister of Foreign Affairs, could feel it in his bones. As he walked through the jaw-dropping, eighty-meter-tall atrium—with its arboreal-style pillars and *shan shui* inspired design—he couldn't shake the sense that he was being watched. No, not watched...judged. But when he scanned the faces of the staff and other residents milling about, nobody was paying him any mind.

*I'm being paranoid, he told himself. It's the stress of the job, that's all.*

Still, something was *definitely* off. The frequency of people calling and messaging him had dropped noticeably below the daily baseline he'd become accustomed to in the job over the past two years. He was still getting directives, updates, and communications from the Foreign Affairs Commission and from the Central Committee, but the questions and requests for direction from staffers in his own office had almost dried up completely. This was odd, because he'd gradually come to believe that nobody did anything in the Ministry without his prior assent.

*If not me, then who is authorizing the daily decisions?*

In the bureaucratic machine that was the Chinese government, a single misstep—not necessarily even a mistake—could end a man’s career.

Or worse...

As the nation’s top diplomat, a position analogous to the United States Secretary of State, Cheng was responsible for overseeing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the People’s Republic of China. In addition to negotiating treaties, advising the State Council on international affairs, and representing China in the United Nations, his ministry’s mandate was to formulate, communicate and administer China’s foreign policy abroad. In today’s complex geopolitical world, a world driven by communication and messaging, his position made him one of the most recognizable and powerful men in China, second only to President Li Jian Jun.

Cheng would never boast about this fact, to do so would be unwise, but his power was real and everyone knew it.

His thoughts took him back to the moment two years ago when President Li had offered him the position. Li’s words played back in Cheng’s mind with all the clarity and poignancy as if the man were speaking to him now:

*“In accepting this position, you will be the face and the fist of China’s foreign policy. You will be the hand world leaders shake first, and the mouth that delivers the ultimatums and unpleasant truths behind closed doors that I cannot. For the next five years, you will be my wolf warrior—barking, snarling, and howling. You will defend the people against the hostile rhetoric of the West. You will defend the nation’s honor when China is disrespected by foreign governments and foreign press. And, you will defend me, when dirty lies and propaganda try to sully my name and reputation. Are you up for the challenge, my friend?”*

Cheng had agreed immediately and unequivocally, without giving the gravity or true meaning of Li's words much thought. *That* version of Cheng had been hungry for power and opportunity. He'd had eyes on the Foreign Affairs Minister position for over a decade and had worked tirelessly to prove and endear himself to the Chinese President. He'd obediently and aggressively tried to demonstrate his skill and willingness to implement Li's political vision at every opportunity. And for this tireless effort, obedience, and loyalty, he had been rewarded.

But recently, he'd doubts had begun to plague him.

No, "doubts" was too strong a word. Second thoughts...he was having second thoughts. *After all, words matter.*

Diplomacy was a profession defined by words—both spoken and unspoken. He'd witnessed the power of words firsthand over the past two years, as other nations' foreign policy was both made and unmade by the power of his words. As Foreign Minister he spoke for China. He spoke for the Party. He spoke for President Li. But speaking for the latter, unfortunately, had proven to be more challenging and precarious than he'd ever imagined.

President Li was a difficult man to please.

Pulling his roller suitcase behind him, Cheng stepped out of the lobby and under the covered porte-cochère where his driver and car were waiting. The black Hongqi H9 luxury sedan sat idling at the curb just ahead, waiting to deliver him to the airport for his trip to Laos to represent China at the upcoming East Asian Summit. This would be his fifth time attending the EAS, his second as Foreign Minister. The eighteen-nation convention was held annually to dialogue about political, environmental, and economic topics related to the stability and prosperity of East Asia. The original membership had only included East Asian countries, but the United States and Russian Federation had muscled their way into the mix in 2011 with dramatic

effect. This summit would be no different than the last, Cheng presumed, with the US contingent exerting their influence at every turn to challenge China's hegemony in setting the agenda and controlling regional policy.

Cheng paused momentarily beside the car to make sure he was seen, but the driver did not get out to load Cheng's bag and open the door as was the normal practice. Instead, the trunk popped open while the driver remained in the driver's seat, not turning to even look at Cheng. Annoyed, Cheng rolled his suitcase to the rear of the vehicle, placed it in the trunk himself, and shut the lid. He then walked to the rear passenger side door and let himself into the vehicle. Once he was settled into his seat, he looked forward toward the driver who had yet to greet him, that's when he noticed this H9 was not like the regular fleet of black cars which served the upper echelon of China's government ministries. This one had a tinted glass divider between the passenger and driver compartments like one would find in a fancy limousine.

*Or a police car,* said the voice in his head.

Without a word from the driver, the H9 pulled away from Chaoyang Park Plaza and glided into Beijing traffic. Cheng was about to knock on the glass divider and tell the man to lower it, when his mobile phone chimed with a text message. He retrieved it from his pocket and glanced at the screen. The sender was his wife. She'd forwarded a hyperlink with no accompanying message. Normally, he would have ignored something like this, but his wife was a good partner. She understood the stress and difficulties of his job, and she had always supported him without complaint. She knew her place, and long ago had ceased calling or texting him during working hours, only contacting him with urgent matters which she was not equipped to deal with herself. Because this was out of character, he clicked on the link.

A webpage opened on his mobile browser for the Global Times—China’s international propaganda and daily tabloid newspaper. The headline article read “Foreign Minister Under Investigation for Corruption and Infidelity,” and was accompanied by the most unflattering picture of Cheng imaginable—a picture which was digitally altered. In the photograph, he was sitting at a lavish dinner table with his arm around a Caucasian woman’s shoulders. His expensive suit looked disheveled and his eyes bloodshot—as if from a night of drinking and alcohol consumption. But worst of all was his laughing expression, that somehow looked maniacal and pathetic at the same time.

A wave of heat flushed his cheeks so hot that his head suddenly felt like it was mounted atop a stove pipe. The picture was an expertly constructed deep fake—his visage grafted onto another man’s body. He knew this with absolute confidence because he’d never seen the woman in the picture before in his life, nor had he sat at that table. As Foreign Minister, he only drank alcohol in a ceremonial capacity, and he never, ever let himself get intoxicated. In his profession, drunkenness was an occupational hazard. The outrage he felt barely eclipsed the second and third place emotions of shock and humiliation. He’d been completely blind-sided by this political assassination piece. And make no mistake, that’s *exactly* what it was...a journalistic kill shot.

“I’m going to have your head on a platter, Xu,” Cheng growled, calling out the paper’s editor in chief by name. “How did you do it without me catching wind first?”

Then, as if someone had just poured a bucket of ice water down the stovepipe, his neck and chest went suddenly tight and cold with realization. The reason it had happened without warning was because the hit job had been sanctioned. Xu wouldn’t authorize a story such as this in a vacuum; that’s not how the Global Times operated. The paper was an instrument of the Party. To run this smear campaign, Xu would have had Li’s blessing first.

*Or be operating on his orders...*

Cheng had never experienced the medical phenomenon known as hyperventilation, but felt pretty sure he was experiencing it now, as his breaths came in small, rapid, unproductive gasps. He felt the mobile phone slip from his grip and fall into the foot well. Panic overwhelmed him, and he lowered his head between his knees in primal reflex to try to catch his breath and stave off the wave of vertigo.

*This is it...I'm out...oh shit, God help me, I'm out. But why?*

His mind went back to the warning his close friend, Qin Haiyu, had given him about speaking his mind too freely about controversial things. Perhaps Qin had been right?

His phone chimed from the floor.

Head still between his knees, he glanced at the screen. It was another text from his wife. A three-word message that simply said: "Is this true?"

"It's not true," he muttered in between gasps. "It's not true..."

While he stared at it, the screen on the phone flickered once then went black.

A moment later, the car braked to a hard stop. Both the right and left side doors opened simultaneously and two men he didn't recognize got in, the one on Cheng's side shoving him forcefully toward the middle.

"What's going on? Who are you?" he said, the adrenaline dump magically restoring Cheng's breath and some measure of mental clarity.

The man on his left pulled a candy-bar sized white plastic cylinder from his suit coat pocket. Gripping it in one hand, the man jammed the bottom end of the tube into Cheng's thigh and pressed a button with his thumb. Cheng felt the needle from the auto-injector punch through

his suit pants and puncture his flesh. A sharp burn followed as the delivery system injected him with whatever drug these men had been ordered to dose him with.

Wide-eyed with fear, Cheng met the eyes of the man holding the injector.

“Why?” he heard himself ask, as his eyelids began to close.

The enforcer in the black suit answered, his hard cold words echoing from very far away:

“President Li thanks you for your service, Minister Cheng,” the man said with a malevolent smile. “But your service is no longer needed...”

# **PART I**

“All war is deception.”  
— Sun Tzu, The Art of War



## **Chapter 1**

*The Ryan family home*

*Overlooking the Chesapeake Bay*

*Maryland*

*2011 Local Time*

Jack Ryan pursed his lips as he looked at the carnage inflicted on his Atlantic fleet. If only he could unleash a salvo instead of having to fire one damn shot at a time, then he might have a chance.

*So much destruction. So much red...*

If he didn't get a hit soon, the battle would be lost.

"C8," he said with certitude, looking up from the board at his daughter, Katie, who sat opposite him at the dining room table.

She glanced down at her grid. "Miss."

"Seriously?" he said, tilting his head down to look at her over the top of the pair of reading glasses perched on his nose. "Check again."

"I don't need to check again, Dad, it's not rocket science. C8 is definitely a miss," she said with a callous grin. "My turn...J1."

He shoved his glasses back up on his nose and looked down at the gray plastic grid where his fleet sat arranged in what he'd felt certain to be an unbeatable naval configuration. Boy, how wrong he'd been. He picked up a little red peg, stuck it into the last remaining hole at the stern of the little plastic ship, then said, "You sunk my battleship."

"Woot, woot. USS Missouri heading to the bottom of the sea," she said, pumping her hands in the air overhead. "That makes four down and one to go. The only ship you have left is your submarine."

He narrowed his eyes playfully at her. "A submarine is all I'll need to finish you off. Fear the Blackfish."

"Un-uh, no way. *My* sub is the Washington. I called dibs when we started. You gotta pick a different boat. Yours can be the Indiana."

"Hello? Commander in Chief, here," he said, raising his right hand and pointing his index finger at the crown of his own head. "Last time I checked, that means I am, *literally*, in charge of the US fleet. So, if I want to designate my flagship as the Blackfish, then there's nothing you can do about it, Lieutenant Commander."

"Sorry, Dennis," she said, wistfully looking down at her little grey submarine and referencing the real-life XO of the USS Washington. "I got outranked which means you're the enemy now."

This wasn't the first time he'd heard his daughter mention Dennis Knepper, who she'd met while riding the elite Virginia class fast attack sub during a near-fatal standoff against the rogue Russian submarine *Belgorod* a few months ago. Jack's "Spidey-sense" told him there might be a budding connection between them, but he'd not heard any mention of them dating. Of course, the *Washington* had remained on station long after his daughter's return from the crisis in

the Atlantic, so at best they'd be working on a long distance thing. He made a mental note to ask Cathy about it. Katie and her mom were thick as thieves when it came to relationship gossip. But in the event his wife decided to be tight-lipped on the matter, as Commander-in-Chief he was privileged to know the USS Washington's location at any given time...so keeping tabs on this potential suitor was not going to be a problem.

“What's that conniving look for?” she said, shaking him from his rumination.

“Oh, I was just thinking about how this game is nothing like naval warfare in real life. If only it could be so simple.”

“If it was this simple, we wouldn't need any ship captains or even sailors for that matter. I, for one, am glad that real life isn't controlled by a couple of callous, detached puppet masters sitting behind computer screens in the shadows. The strength of our military has always been rooted in leading from the front. It started with General Washington's Tent in the Revolutionary War and the tradition has carried on ever since.”

He stared at her a moment and, feeling an upswelling of great pride, said, “In case I haven't told you lately, Katie, I love you. And I'm very proud of you. You're a fine naval officer, and one hell of an intelligence analyst.”

Her cheeks went a little rosy at the comment. “Ahhh, thanks, Dad...but, if you think flattery is going to save your fleet, then you've grossly misjudged your adversary.”

They both chuckled at this and played the rest of the game out. He did manage to dispatch her aircraft carrier, but as expected, she showed him no quarter and soon found and sunk his submarine, ending their epic, father-daughter game of Battleship.

“Two out of three?” she asked, as they both went to work pulling the white pegs out of the grid and depositing them in the molded containers on the side of their iconic, gray plastic clam-shell game boards.

“Heck yes,” he said and momentarily stopped pulling pegs to refill their wine glasses.

“You know, sometimes, I still can’t believe you’re the President of the United States. It’s strange—almost like this is some fantasy we’re making up and everyone else in the world is just going along with it. Do you ever feel that way?”

“All the time,” he said with a self-deprecating smile.

“How do you make that feeling go away?”

“By trying to ground myself in the institution of the office.”

“You mean like when you’re sitting at the Resolute Desk in the Oval?”

He nodded. “Yes, the physicality helps, but it’s more the people running the government and military who I interact with every day who make it real. I see it in their eyes. Hear it in their words. Feel it from their presence. Everybody is looking to me with...expectation. Presidential expectation. They’re counting on me to lead, and that makes it real. It’s not a fantasy for them, I can tell you that.”

“I’ve always wondered what that must feel like. I don’t know how you do it, Dad. I would wilt under that kind of pressure.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” he said with a confident shake of his head. “I’ve seen you under pressure, and wilting is not in your DNA.”

“Thanks, but I don’t know about that. Let’s just say I’m glad that I’m not the Ryan in charge of representing the nation and making decisions that will affect the lives of millions. No

thank you. I'll take my little office at ONI and a stack of reports to analyze and leave leading the country to you."

*Your time will come, daughter, he thought but did not say. If there's one thing I've learned in this life, it's that Fate laughs at any man who thinks he has a choice over which battles he'll have to fight.*

Thankfully, for the moment, the seas were calm and the sailing smooth. In the months since the Belgorod incident, calamity had taken a sabbatical and the world had been granted a reprieve from global conflict, pandemics, terrorism, and natural disaster. He knew, of course, that this reprieve would be temporary—that the maligned forces of evil and entropy were already conspiring to unleash their next plot to bring chaos and death to the world. But tonight, the Ryan family was safe, and he would savor every second of this opportunity to sip wine and play Battleship with his daughter. Sure, he *could be* working. His Presidential "To-Do" list was a mile long and his inbox flooded with messages and briefs waiting to be read.

But the work could wait until tomorrow.

That was something else he'd learned over the years.

When a moment like this presented itself, sit back and enjoy it. Which was exactly what he intended to do.

## **Chapter 2**

*Xinhuamen Gate*

*Main entrance to Zhongnanhai Government Compound*

*174 Cheng'an Avenue*

*Beijing, China*

*0740 Local Time*

Defense Minister Qin Hâiyû crossed his legs in the comfortable leather seat of the black Hongqi H9 luxury sedan, his index finger tapping on the center armrest. It was a bad habit he'd picked up, to dissipate nervous energy, all the way back to his junior officer days in the PLA Navy. Even when he'd commanded the Luyang III Class destroyer *Guiyang* almost a decade ago, his left index finger would tap out its little cadence on the armrest of his Captain's chair in the bridge. Back then, he'd thought the burden of commanding a warship was the pinnacle of pressure.

*Oh, what I wouldn't give to return to those simpler days...*

As a ship captain, the pitfalls of command were clear and identifiable. Running aground, collision at sea, personnel problems, failing to achieve or execute mission parameters...and so

on. In those days, he'd spent his time worrying about the people *beneath* him. Negligence, lapses in judgement, or mistakes borne from inexperience or poor communication—these were the problems that plagued commanding officers. Such things ended careers—but rarely *lives*. But this job, with its secret agendas and knives behind backs, was a viper's game and filled him with anxiety the likes of which he'd never thought possible.

*Not anxiety...paranoia.*

“A few more moments, Minister Qin,” the driver said, looking at him in the rear view, interpreting his tension as concern for being late. “The traffic around the complex is heavier than usual.”

“Thank you, Da,” he said.

His thoughts went to Cheng Kai and the dubious fate of the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

*I warned him that his hubris would be his downfall...but did he listen? No, he did not.*

The last time Qin had visited privately with his friend, Cheng's family had been on vacation in Singapore, which had given the two men a rare opportunity to speak frankly and unencumbered. Cheng, who only drank in private, had imbibed heavily that night. As the two men got drunk, the conversation had shifted to President Li's growing desire to “re-integrate” Taiwan into China. Plumbed by alcohol, Cheng had let his true feelings be known on the matter:

*“Li is a fool if he thinks the Americans will do nothing. General Su thought that a few years ago. President Ryan crushed those plans.*

*We risk everything to gain little. Ten years ago, it made sense. But today, there is nothing that little island can do that we cannot. This is about Li's ego. Nothing more.”*

Unfortunately, the recent re-election of the trouble making president of Taiwan had provided a megaphone for independence rhetoric on the global stage. And predictably, it had

only amplified the almost manic obsession President Li harbored to re-integrate the island, even if that re-integration required military force. Devising a comprehensive military plan for reunification of the belligerent island had been Qin's professional charter since day one of his appointment as Commander of the PLA Navy. Cheng believed it was Qin's plan that had prompted Li to select Qin as the replacement for Defense Minister Zhao Fu. Zhao Fu's "retirement" had been swift and sudden and taken *almost* everyone by surprise.

But not Cheng.

*"Zhao agreed with me. Now is not the time for reunification,"* Cheng had said. *"We were working behind the scenes to build a coalition so we would have strength in numbers when confronting Li about the danger and hubris of his plan, but now is Zhao is gone..."*

In the aftermath, the inner circle understood—although never discussed—that Zhao had been eliminated. Qin did not have history with his predecessor like he did with Cheng. Zhao had been Qin's boss, on paper, since Qin had been the head of the PLA Navy at the time, but Qin had personally interacted with him very little. And, frankly, Qin had not wanted to. Zhao had been a pompous ass. His disappearance, and later his announced retirement, had opened the position which Qin now filled.

Qin had been elated at the time.

*If only I knew then what I know now...*

Qin glanced at his watch. Plenty of time to make the meeting in Conference Room Number One in Zhongnan North. The very fact that such a meeting had been called on short notice, and at such an early hour, was cause enough for concern. Perhaps he would learn something of Cheng Kai's disappearance. Maybe the Foreign Minister been the victim of some foreign plot and it had not been his reckless mouth that had led to his disappearance.



*And then I would have much less to fear myself.*

It was known that he and Cheng were friends and socialized often.

Could this connection be enough to spark Qin's own fall from favor?

For Qin, what had happened to Cheng felt like déjà vu. Just like Zhao, Cheng had been disappeared by President Li Jian Jun's secret police. Otherwise, there would have been immediate and frank discussions about the Foreign Minister's supposed corruption and infidelity. There would have been arguments about his fate and whether damage control was necessary. But none of that had happened. They'd had two cabinet meetings since Cheng's disappearance, and no mention of him had occurred, not even with the glaring diplomatic fallout at the East Asian Summit.

No, there was no mistake. Cheng Kai was gone.

Qin had warned him not to voice opposition to Li's designs on Taiwan, and now he was gone.

*"You worry too much, Hàiyû. I am a respected man whose voice matters..."*

Qin chased the away the memory from their last evening together and glanced outside the sedan. As Da circled the black sedan around Taiye Lake, Qin glanced out the window at the Hanyuan Temple, situated on the Yingtai Island in the "South Sea," the southern part of the ancient, man-made lake. That lake, and the one to the north separated by a sliver of land now the site of the rebuilt Qinzhen Dian Hall had been constructed in 1421 from the basic outline of the complex emerging during the Ming Dynasty. It had been the de-facto center of government since the Empress Dowager Cixi and later Prince Regent Chun had built residences there instead of inside the Forbidden city. Zhongnanhai had been the center of government ever since, first as the Republic of China under Yuan Shikai as the Beiyang Government and later as the People's

Republic under Mao Zedong. Most of the “real” government business occurred on the north side of the complex, on the lake known as the Northern Sea, where the Party Chair and other government complexes now sat. The southern area was for show and entertaining visitors more than anything.

*So much history.*

Da maneuvered right, around the northern shore of the lake known as the Northern Sea slowing at an additional checkpoint where they were quickly waved through, the uniformed guard snapping a sharp salute to the darkened widows behind which Qin sat, tapping his left index finger on the armrest.

They were nearly there. Qin slipped his phone from his suit pocket and dialed his wife.

“Is everything well, Hâiyû?” his wife asked, subtle urgency and concern in her voice.

“We are at the airport and about to board.”

“Yes, yes, all is well,” he said, a hint of a smile forming at the sound of her voice. “I simply miss you already. You and the girls.”

He could almost see her relaxing at this. “We understand, my love. Your work is very important. Do you know if you will still be able to meet us?”

They had been planning this family vacation to the Maldives for months. They had a wonderful suite waiting at the Four Seasons and a week to enjoy one another, but the call last night for this meeting had put a brake on the plans. Not knowing what might be happening, he’d insisted she take their daughters and go anyway, that he could meet her. No reason for everyone to miss out because of his work commitments. His teenage girls would only be living at home for a short time more. His eldest son, Xiang, who had graduated the Republic of China Naval

Academy two years earlier, now served in the PLA Navy. Like Qin himself, Xiang was rarely able to visit home. Soon, his precious twin girls would graduate and be busy with their own lives.

“I very much hope so, Caiji” he said. “I am arriving at my meeting now and will let you know as soon as I do. I simply wanted to say I love you, before you board your plane.”

“We love you, too, xīn gān,” Caiji said, sounding reassured.

Qin ended the call as the car arrived at the front of the Headquarters for the State Council. His driver parked and then hustled around to open the door for him. Qin disliked the pampering, but it would be a sign of weakness to be seen here, of all places, opening his own door, and in any case, his young driver seemed to relish the opportunity to serve in such a way.

“Would you like me to wait for you, sir?” Da asked.

“Yes,” he said and the young man bowed. Normally he would send Da to have a coffee or something, but he had no idea how long this meeting might take. It was not unusual for Li to assemble everyone and share something that might have easily been sent in an unclassified email. The record for the shortest unscheduled meeting in Conference Room One was three and a half minutes.

Moments later he crossed the expansive room that served as a foyer of sorts, but had truly been transformed into a museum of artifacts dating back to the Ming Dynasty, and entered through the floor to ceiling wooden doors into the room where State Council business was discussed. The seats around the expansive conference table were filled, with most of the attendees coming from offices within the complex. The Deputy Secretary General gave Qin a solemn nod, while Secretary General Xu Chao, didn't even look up. There were no military officers present, which was not unusual, but their presence always served to make Qin feel less like a political imposter.

Each place at the table was marked by a leather binder, which many of the assembled were already perusing. In addition to the binder, everyone had a cup and saucer for hot tea.

*All places save one.*

The seat normally occupied by Cheng Kai had no folder and no tea service setting...

“We are assembled?” said the voice of President Li Jian Jun as he entered from the door to Qin’s left.

Clearly, Li had been waiting to make his entrance only once Qin arrived, though a glance at the clock on the far wall validated that Qin had arrived a full six full minutes early. Qin quickly took his seat and opened the leather folder as Li stopped behind his own chair, but remained standing. Qin fought the sudden urge to glance again at the empty seat. He stared a moment at the intimately familiar document inside the folder—a document he had prepared—then looked up, hoping the shock he felt was not evident on his face.

### **Operation Sea Serpent: Reunification of Taiwan**

*Now I know why Cheng is not here, and why I will never see my friend again...*

“Gentlemen,” Li began, “we are quite fortunate that our current Minister of National Defense, Admiral Qin Hâiyû, is not only an expert on naval and marine operations but is the architect of the plan you see in front of you. This is a plan that has been in evolution, has in fact evolved as often as the changing winds of the South China Sea, as the threats to our sovereign claim have evolved—as has the threat to our security. Minister Qin, in the interest of brevity, give us a five-minute overview of this battle plan.”

“Of course, Mr. President,” Qin said.

He rose, and in general terms outlined the plan in the nearly one-hundred-page document in the folder. He did not need to glance through the pages, of course. The operation was like a

child of his own, one that had started as a flirtation, then became a wish, and over the last two years had grown into something he was quite proud of. But it was a theoretical plan only, born of the intersection of mandates from his superiors and the intellectual curiosity of a man who'd dedicated his life to Naval Warfare. It was a wargame—one that he had, in his mind, waged time and time again into something that now was an operational plan that he believed to be not only possible, but almost guaranteed to be successful.

*If one measured success as simply the achievement of an objective.*

Taking Taiwan was like taking a hill in a war zone—given enough resources and the desire to succeed, any stronghold could be taken. But stratagems rarely contemplated the aftermath. There was risk in the *having*, not only in the taking. Nowhere was this more true than in the reunification of Taiwan by force. Could China take Taiwan? Yes, of course. Could they hold it? Almost certainly. Would there be other costs to the People's Republic of China?

*Without a doubt...*

Such was the conversation he'd had with Cheng, the last time he'd seen him alive. It had been Cheng intention to speak his mind to the President.

It had been Qin's advice that he hold his tongue.

He felt his eyes tick over to the empty seat and hoped the look went unnoticed.

"It is a brilliant plan, and one that you can see if absolutely achievable," President Li said when he'd finished, and Qin gave a humble bow.

There were murmurs around the table.

"Who has questions for our Minister of Defense?" Li posed, finally pulling out his own, much taller chair and taking a seat, crossing his legs at the ankle and pouring some tea from the pot beside his cup.

“That we can defeat the traitorous ROC forces of Taiwan is not in doubt, I should think,” Secretary General Xu said, looking at Qin with a critical eye. “But surely this plan takes into account an inevitable American response, Minister Qin?”

“It does,” Qin admitted, unwilling to look over at Li for fear his eyes would betray how deep this concern was. “After war gaming this scenario out many times, it is our conclusion that American and NATO forces, but certainly the American fleet, would move assets into the area as a show of force—”

“Sabre rattling, nothing more,” Li interrupted, still sipping his tea. “Minister Qin is the expert on military operations, but it is my job to estimate the will of our enemies. The Americans are weary of war. After two decades of war against terrorism, the American people have no appetite for more military conflict. Look at their willingness to give up Crimea to our Russian friends, rather actually *using* the power they seem willing to project. President Ryan is a worthy opponent, but he rules at the whim of his people and they will never support military action that would risk war with a nation as mighty as ours.”

The Secretary General nodded, but now gave Qin a softer look.

“Is it your estimate that the Americans would give up Taiwan without firing a shot of their own?”

“Possibly,” Qin said, couching his words, the empty seat across from him shouting its warning. “But there is danger in even a limited engagement. We would expect a very short-term conflict with United States Naval Forces within the South China sea, if only due to the inherent dangers of escalation when our forces operate in very close proximity. However, as our President has said, we do not believe that the Americans would risk an all-out war. The strength of this plan is the speed with which it unfolds. By the time the Americans arrive at the decision point of

if and how to intervene, the Taiwan islands would all be in the hands of our forces. Thus, intervention means an offensive attack against China, which we do not believe the Americans would have the stomach for.”

*But this says nothing of the enormous geopolitical pressure they could exert if they had the sympathy of the world. It could be a catastrophic blow politically and, more immediately paralyzing, economically.*

As he'd discussed with Kai, it was a mistake to underestimate the will of the Americans if blood had been spilled. They had a country song in the states that painted the Americans as a big dog who bit if you rattled his cage.

This, he believed, was a true metaphor

The Secretary pursed his lips and studied him.

“So, we would expect no direct resistance from the American forces,” Xu pressed.

Qin chose his words carefully. While this was all just a theoretical war gaming plan, it was best to not fill this room with too much confidence in the plan, lest it become a reality. By the same hand, he saw what could happen when you went against the view of the President, evidence by that damn empty chair.

“It is very possible that, while the attack on the Island would be bloody indeed, no shots with the Americans would be directly exchanged. Our absolute worst case scenario would be very brief military conflict at sea in the region, possibly resulting in damage to the American fleet.”

“Damage?” the Secretary General pressed.

Qin clenched his jaw, but there was no hiding it. Hell, the BDEs, or battle damage estimates, were in the damn document if they chose to read the whole thing.

“At the extreme, there could be the loss of an American Naval vessel,” Qin said. In fact, the BDE estimated this to be a real possibility and that, in fact, the most likely loss would be an American aircraft carrier. But there was no need for him to press this point and upset President Li. No need, because the assembled leaders would read it for themselves. It was all clearly outlined in the extensive and sobering battle damage estimates in the paper they each had in front of them.

*Let the numbers speak for themselves...as many as two to five thousand Americans could perish.*

Secretary Xu’s eyes widened a moment, but then he got the reaction under control before glancing at the President and giving him a nod.

“I see,” he said.

“And that is an absolute worst case estimate,” Li said with a smile.

“You are to be congratulated, Minister Qin,” the Deputy Secretary said with a bow of his head and a sympathetic look. “It sounds like your operational plan is a tremendous tool to have in our tool box.”

“Thank you, Mr. Deputy Secretary,” Qin said.

“Or perhaps more,” President Li said, leaning in and placing his tea cup on the table. Qin felt his pulse pounding in his temple. “Operation Sea Serpent is a large scale Naval and Marine landing force exercise taking place in just two weeks. This is an exercise planned for some time, and one that has been leaked intentionally to the American intelligence apparatus.”

“Why?” the Deputy Secretary asked, then blushed at the misstep of interrupting the President. For Li’s part, he ignored the overstep and instead smiled at the Deputy Secretary. “I am glad you asked,” he said. “For the better part of two years, we have harassed the American



Navy and conducted frequent, large scale, and aggressive exercises. The result has been that the United States Navy has become numb to such prodding, and therefore have become complacent. Despite our leaking information about Sea Serpent, we have seen no increase in naval activity nor hints about what they like to call “force projection.” Sea Serpent, it would seem will go ahead unchallenged by the Americans.”

Qin felt a knot form in the pit of his stomach.

“Minister Qin, can you provide for us what type of Marine and Naval presence would need to participate in this exercise, this Operation Sea Serpent, were it to be modified into the execution of the real Operation Sea Serpent—the operation you created to defeat the Taiwan forces and reunify Taiwan to the homeland? I would like to see this a summary of this as soon as possible.”

“Of course, Mr. President,” Qin said, bowing and then returning to his seat.

“Are you suggesting that we intend to invade Taiwan in two weeks?” Xu asked gently.

“I am suggesting that, eventually, the timing will be such that we can reclaim the island of Taiwan and reunite the patriots living there with the homeland. We can reclaim our rights to the strategic position of the Island in the South China Sea. We can reclaim our rights to the rich minerals available and the technology production that competes now with our own. Taiwan has always been a part of China. I want us to be prepared for that opportunity, whenever it might come along.”

“I will provide you with my assessment as soon as possible, Mr. President,” Qin said.

“Tomorrow,” Li said, reaching again for his tea. “You were made Minister because you bring extreme value and experience to this position which has been lacking. I assume you can brief us on these details by tomorrow morning, say...ten o’clock?”

“Of course,” Qin said, but his mind went to the 055 Chinese destroyer Lhasa, operating this very moment in the northern part of the Strait of Taiwan. A brilliant and deadly modern warship.

A ship where his only son, Lieutenant Qin Xiang, now served as a junior officer.

“It will be my honor, Mr. President,” Qin said.

“Wonderful,” Li said, and was on his feet already. “Then we are adjourned until tomorrow at Ten AM.”

Qin rose, as they all did, and watched him go, tasting bile in the back of his throat.

President Li couldn't possibly be considering this for real. President Ryan would never fail to respond to threats against his people. Qin's worst case BDE showed the loss of multiple aircraft, damage to several American vessels, and the potential loss of an American aircraft carrier from the 7<sup>th</sup> fleet in the ensuing Naval showdown.

More than five thousand American lives.

Qin had no doubt that the Americans, most especially with President Ryan at the helm, would indeed go to war over such a loss.

The impact to China would be immeasurable and would set back their geopolitical and economic gains by decades.

Surely someone, tomorrow perhaps, would say something.

He glanced again at the empty chair where his friend once sat.

*What am I prepared to do for my country and my family?*

Mind reeling, he followed the others out of the conference room and headed across the foyer.

The artifacts of the warrior nation they had once been, a warrior nation many would argue fell from its own hubris, called out to him as he walked, shouting warnings.

How could he agree to be the instrument of such a fall?