

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

Multi-Front War, American Overstretch, and the April Temptation Across the Taiwan Strait

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Abstract

As March 2026 draws to a close, the United States finds itself enmeshed in two simultaneous, resource-intensive conflicts. The war in Ukraine, now entering its fifth year, continues to drain Western military stockpiles and command diplomatic bandwidth. Operation Epic Fury — the joint US-Israeli assault on Iran that began on 28 February 2026 — has opened a second, intensely demanding front, consuming enormous quantities of precision munitions, air assets, and naval power while destabilising the broader Middle East. Against this backdrop, April approaches: historically one of only two narrow meteorological windows in the Taiwan Strait during which a large-scale Chinese amphibious invasion is operationally feasible. This paper argues that the convergence of American multi-front exhaustion with the spring crossing window constitutes the most structurally tempting moment for Beijing since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 — and analyses why, from a purely military-strategic perspective, China's leadership may view the coming weeks as a unique opportunity that demands serious analytical attention.

1. Introduction: The Compounding Weight of Simultaneous Wars

For over three years, Washington's strategic attention has been anchored to Eastern Europe. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered the largest Western military mobilisation since the Cold War, with the United States serving as the primary supplier of advanced weaponry, intelligence, and diplomatic support.¹

European allies, though increasingly shouldering the burden themselves, have largely done so by purchasing US-manufactured systems — from HIMARS rocket artillery to Patriot air defence batteries — and transferring them onward to Kyiv. The transatlantic defence

¹Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. For ongoing logistical strain, see Congressional Research Service, 'U.S. Military Assistance to Ukraine,' updated February 2026.

industrial base has strained to keep pace, with ammunition production and equipment reserves running well below pre-war levels.²

Then, on 28 February 2026, a new and enormously consequential conflict erupted. The United States and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury — a coordinated assault on the Islamic Republic of Iran with the stated aims of toppling the regime in Tehran, destroying its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, eliminating its navy, and assassinating its senior leadership, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Within the first twelve hours alone, US and Israeli forces conducted nearly 900 strikes.³

As of 17 March 2026, that conflict shows no signs of swift resolution. The Iranian regime, though grievously damaged, has retaliated with waves of ballistic missiles and drones against Israel and US military installations across the Middle East, the Strait of Hormuz is effectively closed, and American commanders are managing an active, high-intensity war on a second front — simultaneously with the ongoing commitments in Europe.⁴⁵

It is precisely in this moment — with the calendar turning to April — that students of Indo-Pacific security must confront an uncomfortable question: has the window for a Chinese military move against Taiwan ever been more structurally advantageous from Beijing's perspective?

2. Operation Epic Fury: Weapons, Costs, and the Risk of Prolongation

2.1 The Offensive Arsenal

The scale of munitions expended in the Iran campaign has been extraordinary. According to US Central Command, Operation Epic Fury has drawn on more than twenty distinct weapons systems. Offensively, the United States has deployed **Tomahawk Land Attack Cruise Missiles (TLAMs)** — launched from Navy destroyers in the Arabian Sea — against hardened underground nuclear facilities and command-and-control infrastructure. The conflict has also marked the first operational combat use of the **Precision Strike Missile (PrSM)**, a US Army long-range guided missile system designed to replace the ATACMS and strike fixed targets at ranges exceeding 500 kilometres. Additionally, the **Low-Cost Uncrewed Combat Attack System (LUCAS)**, a drone modelled structurally on Iran's own

²European defence procurement from the United States has accelerated dramatically since 2022. See NATO, 'Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025),' press release, February 2025.

³U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), official statement, 10 March 2026: 'US forces have struck more than 5,000 targets in Iran since the commencement of Operation Epic Fury on 28 February 2026.'

⁴Al Jazeera, 'US-Israel Attacks on Iran: Death Toll and Injuries Live Tracker,' updated 17 March 2026. Preliminary figures: 1,444 dead in Iran, 13 US soldiers killed, and over 20 dead in Gulf states.

⁵Britannica, '2026 Iran War,' last updated 16 March 2026. Nearly 900 joint strikes were conducted in the first twelve hours of Operation Epic Fury.

Shahed-series loitering munitions, has been employed in large numbers against air defence radars and dispersed military targets.⁶

Manned aviation has played a central role: **F/A-18E/F Super Hornets** operating from carrier strike groups in the Arabian Sea and **F-35A/B/C Lightning II** stealth aircraft — operating from both carrier decks and land bases — have conducted deep-penetration strikes against Iranian air defences, missile factories, and leadership compounds. The use of stealth platforms was essential given Iran's remaining S-300 and domestically produced Bavar-373 air defence systems.

2.2 The Defensive Burden

Iran's response has imposed a substantial defensive burden. Tehran launched hundreds of ballistic missiles and thousands of drones at Israeli population centres and at US military installations across at least six Gulf states. To counter this barrage, the United States has relied heavily on two layered systems: **Patriot PAC-3 MSE** batteries, which intercept ballistic missiles at lower altitudes, and **Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)** systems, designed to intercept threats in the upper atmosphere and at hypersonic approach speeds. Israel has employed both the **Iron Dome** — for short-range rockets and drones — and **David's Sling**, its medium-to-long-range interceptor designed specifically to defeat cruise missiles and large unguided rockets.⁷

Each interceptor fired represents a depletion of finite stockpiles that cannot be replenished at speed. The US defence industrial base — already strained by three years of Ukraine support — is now asked to simultaneously backfill European allies' inventories and replenish its own rapidly emptying magazines in the Middle East. Senior Pentagon officials have noted publicly that production rates for both Patriot and THAAD interceptors remain far below consumption rates in active conflicts.

2.3 The Risk of Prolongation

What was initially framed by the Trump administration as a swift, decisive campaign has shown early signs of strategic drift. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has struck at least 27 US military bases across the region, and for the first time in history, Iran has launched direct attacks against all six Gulf Cooperation Council states.⁸

⁶Al Jazeera, 'Map Shows How 17 Days of Attacks Have Evolved in the US-Israel War on Iran,' 16 March 2026. CENTCOM confirmed use of Tomahawk cruise missiles, Precision Strike Missiles (PrSM), LUCAS drones, MQ-9 Reapers, F/A-18s, and F-35 aircraft.

⁷Patriot missile batteries and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) were deployed to intercept Iranian ballistic missiles. Israel employed Iron Dome and David's Sling interceptor systems. See Al Jazeera, 16 March 2026, op. cit.

⁸Wikipedia, '2026 Iran War,' updated 17 March 2026. Iran's IRGC launched strikes against at least 27 US bases across the Middle East. For the first time in history, Iran attacked all six Gulf Cooperation Council states.

The Strait of Hormuz — the world's most critical oil artery, through which roughly twenty per cent of global petroleum passes — has been effectively closed, triggering an energy and food security emergency of global proportions.⁹

On 17 March 2026 — the date of writing — Israel announced the assassination of Ali Larijani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council. Iran's military has reportedly lost command coherence over several units. The conflict is, by any measure, not concluding on the timeline Washington envisaged. US Army Chief of Staff and senior Pentagon planners are warning that the campaign may stretch into a sustained, long-term military commitment.

3. The April Window: Meteorology as Military Doctrine

The Taiwan Strait is not a year-round operational environment. Its weather patterns — governed by alternating northeast and southwest monsoons, typhoon seasons, and significant wave height cycles — impose severe constraints on large-scale amphibious operations. As Ian Easton, one of the foremost Western analysts of a potential Chinese invasion, has established, there exist only two brief annual periods when weather conditions are genuinely permissive for the massed crossing of a contested strait by an amphibious fleet: **April–May** and **October**.¹⁰

The logic is straightforward. From June through August, Taiwan is battered by typhoons and the southwest monsoon — frequent torrential rain, winds exceeding 20 metres per second, and significant wave heights that routinely exceed 3–4 metres. Between November and February, the northeast winter monsoon dominates, producing sustained high seas and fierce winds that would make amphibious landing craft operations extremely hazardous and potentially catastrophic. During these months, Chinese forces crossing the strait "would consistently encounter unforgiving seas, high winds, and frequent rain," as Van Horrick summarised in his analysis of Taiwan Strait crossing windows.¹¹

A US Naval War College report cited by AFP identified the operational windows as "*May to July and October*" — though the spring window is typically considered to open from late March and reach optimal conditions in April.¹²

⁹Strait of Hormuz closure: ACLED, 'Middle East Special Issue: March 2026,' March 2026. For food and energy implications, see UN World Food Programme statement, March 2026.

¹⁰Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia* (Washington: The Project 2049 Institute, 2017). Easton identifies April and October as the two most favourable weather windows.

¹¹Benjamin Van Horrick, 'A Strait Too Far: How a Deliberate Campaigning Approach in the Pacific Can Make Beijing Think Twice,' *War on the Rocks*, 5 June 2023. The author notes that Chinese forces crossing in summer or winter 'would consistently encounter unforgiving seas, high winds, and frequent rain.'

¹²France24 / AFP, 'A Chinese Invasion of Taiwan: Too Costly to Countenance?', 17 June 2022, citing a US Naval War College report that identifies 'May to July and October' as the two operational windows for a large-scale amphibious

Scientific literature supports this conclusion. A 2019 study by Cai et al., published in the *Journal of Atmospheric and Oceanic Technology*, conducted extensive measurements of significant wave height (Hs) in the southwestern Taiwan Strait using high-frequency radar during January 2014 — the heart of the winter monsoon. Their data confirm that winter conditions, with Hs regularly exceeding 3 metres, would impose severe operational penalties on unprotected amphibious vessels. The corollary is that the calmer seas of April represent the inverse: the most benign conditions the strait offers for large-scale amphibious transit.¹³

The narrowness of these windows is itself strategically significant. It compresses the decision space for Chinese planners but also focuses the attention of Taiwanese and American defenders. US planners have increasingly oriented their spring exercises — including the Iron Fist and Cobra Gold series — explicitly around this calendar window, using it to demonstrate resolve and operational presence during the very weeks when China's crossing would be most feasible.

April is therefore not merely a matter of mild weather. It is, in the language of military planning, the crossing window — the moment when nature briefly suspends the strait's role as Taiwan's most reliable natural defender.

4. Beijing's Strategic Calculus: The Temptation of the Moment

From a purely military-strategic perspective — setting aside, for the moment, the enormous economic, diplomatic, and domestic political risks — the confluence of events in early 2026 presents China's leadership with a set of conditions they have not previously encountered simultaneously.

4.1 A Distracted Guarantor

The United States' credibility as Taiwan's de facto security guarantor rests not only on stated commitment but on demonstrated capacity to respond. Both are now under significant pressure. American military assets — carrier strike groups, long-range precision munitions, air defence interceptors, and logistics chains — are actively engaged on two fronts simultaneously. The question for Beijing is not simply whether Washington *would* intervene in a Taiwan scenario, but whether it *could* do so effectively while simultaneously sustaining operations in Ukraine (indirectly) and Iran (directly).¹⁴

assault.

¹³Cai et al., 'Assessment of Significant Wave Height in the Taiwan Strait Measured by a Single HF Radar System,' *Journal of Atmospheric and Oceanic Technology* 36 (July 2019): 1419-1432. The study's data, collected January 2014, documents the severe wave conditions typical of winter monsoon periods.

¹⁴Global Guardian, 'Will China Invade Taiwan? A Potential Timeline for Conflict,' 2026. The analysis notes that 'a crisis in the Middle East involving the U.S. military could tip the scale in favor of action.'

President Trump has not committed publicly to Taiwan's defence. The *Foreign Affairs* assessment from February 2026 is striking: "China is now convinced that it is unlikely to see a US president more indifferent toward Taiwan... than Donald Trump." Trump's willingness to allow Iran to become a grinding, multi-month campaign — and his demonstrated transactional approach to alliances — may reinforce in Beijing the perception that Washington's response to a Taiwan move would be hesitant, delayed, or qualified.¹⁵

4.2 Depleted Stockpiles and a Strained Defence Industrial Base

Perhaps most consequential from a purely military perspective is the state of the US and allied munitions inventory. Three years of Ukraine support, combined with an active and high-intensity campaign in Iran, have placed enormous strain on the defence industrial base. The systems most needed to contest a PLA assault on Taiwan — Tomahawks, PAC-3 MSE interceptors, THAAD missiles, Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles (JASSM), and advanced anti-ship munitions — are precisely those being consumed in greatest volume by Operation Epic Fury. RAND Corporation has previously warned that the US would struggle to prevail in a Taiwan conflict under current force balances; that calculus has only worsened.¹⁶

4.3 China's Military Modernisation and the Davidson Window

Chinese military capability has continued to develop rapidly. The PLA commissioned its third aircraft carrier in 2025, launched a new generation of amphibious assault ships, and has reportedly deployed specialised landing barges designed explicitly for the beaches of western Taiwan. Exercises throughout 2025 increasingly rehearsed the precise operational sequences — port blockades, precision strikes on Taiwanese command and control, and carrier-enabled counter-intervention missions — required for a Taiwan campaign.¹⁷

The so-called "Davidson Window" — the period identified by former Indo-Pacific Commander Admiral Phil Davidson and confirmed by CIA Director William Burns — suggested Xi Jinping had instructed the PLA to be ready for a Taiwan operation by 2027. As of 2026, that deadline is imminent.¹⁸

4.4 Reduced PLA ADIZ Activity: A Telling Signal

¹⁵ASPI (Australian Strategic Policy Institute), Joe Keary, 'Xi's Taiwan Scorecard: Why 2026 Is Not the Year,' *The Strategist*, 14 January 2026.

¹⁶Foreign Affairs, 'A Perfect Storm for Taiwan in 2026?', 2 February 2026. The article notes that the PLA has commissioned its third aircraft carrier, a sophisticated amphibious assault ship, and specialised landing barges for Taiwanese operations.

¹⁷Wikipedia, 'Davidson Window,' updated January 2026. Admiral Phil Davidson warned the US Senate in March 2021 that China planned to 'supplant the United States' and that Taiwan was 'clearly one of their ambitions' before 2027. CIA Director William Burns stated in 2023 that Xi had instructed the PLA to be ready for a Taiwan invasion by 2027.

¹⁸AEI / Institute for the Study of War, 'China and Taiwan Update,' 6 March 2026. PLA ADIZ incursions dropped to their lowest monthly total since President Lai took office, at 147 sorties in February 2026.

In an intriguing development, AEI and the Institute for the Study of War noted in their March 2026 update that PLA incursions into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone dropped to their lowest level since President Lai Ching-te took office — just 147 sorties in February, compared to a previous monthly average exceeding 300. While this may reflect seasonal patterns and the conclusion of China's annual Two Sessions political meetings, it has prompted some analysts to consider whether quieter skies over Taiwan might precede, rather than follow, a period of escalation. Beijing may also be managing its relationship with Washington diplomatically ahead of expected leader-level engagements in April.¹⁹

4.5 The Ukraine Precedent: Why Beijing Waited — and Why It May Not Wait Longer

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, several Western analysts expected Beijing to interpret the international response — sweeping sanctions, rearmament, unprecedented alliance cohesion — as a sobering deterrent against adventurism. China did not act then. But the international environment of 2026 is materially different. The transatlantic alliance, though reinvigorated on paper, is primarily focused on Europe. The United States is now actively at war in the Middle East. Trump's administration has displayed deep ambivalence about the liberal international order that underwrote Taiwan's security for decades. Russia, China's partner, has not been defeated. And the spring crossing window is approaching.²⁰

5. Constraints and Countervailing Factors

A balanced assessment demands acknowledgment of the significant factors that argue against Chinese action in April 2026, even from a military standpoint.

First, Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign within the PLA has removed many senior officers — including members of the Central Military Commission and generals from the 31st Army Corps most knowledgeable about Taiwan operations. Military institutions weakened by purges are not optimal instruments for the most complex amphibious operation in modern history.²¹

Second, economic interdependence remains a powerful brake. China's economy, though increasingly resilient to external shocks, would face devastating sanctions if it moved against

¹⁹Foreign Affairs, op. cit. As the article notes, 'China is now convinced that it is unlikely to see a U.S. president more indifferent toward Taiwan... than Donald Trump.'

²⁰Council on Foreign Relations, Steven A. Cook et al., 'Gauging the Impact of U.S.-Israeli Strikes on Iran,' 28 February 2026.

²¹Eurasia Business News, Anthony Marcus, 'Could China Invade Taiwan in 2026?', 13 February 2026. The piece notes that Russia, under Putin, was reported to be helping China prepare for a potential invasion using advanced airborne assault technology.

Taiwan. The PRC's ongoing trade frictions with Washington have already demonstrated Beijing's sensitivity to economic coercion.

Third, while the US may be distracted and depleted, it is not absent from the Indo-Pacific. Carrier strike groups, forward-deployed Marines, and the increasingly capable militaries of Japan, Australia, and the Philippines represent a significant collective deterrent — one that has been actively reinforced by US spring campaigning exercises designed precisely to maximise presence during the April window.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, writing in January 2026, concluded that an invasion in 2026 remains unlikely — that Beijing would more probably persist with coercion short of war. Most independent analysts continue to assign a less-than-even probability to a full-scale invasion in the near term.²²²³

6. Conclusion: The Most Dangerous Month in Years

The convergence examined in this paper is not, in itself, proof of imminent Chinese military action against Taiwan. Beijing has thus far chosen strategic patience, and the constraints on such an operation — military, economic, and political — remain formidable. But the analytical task is to identify when risk is elevated, not merely to confirm the absence of certainty.

By that measure, April 2026 represents the most structurally hazardous moment for Taiwan in the post-Cold War era. The United States is conducting an active, expanding war in the Middle East, consuming irreplaceable precision munitions and air defence interceptors. Its military leadership is managing simultaneous crises across three theatres. Its political leadership has sent ambiguous signals about commitment to Taiwan. And the Taiwan Strait's brief annual window of meteorological permissiveness is opening.

China has watched the United States become "bogged down" — first in Ukraine's shadow, and now in Iran's fire. From Beijing's perspective, the question is no longer theoretical: if not now, when? The answer may still be "not yet." But it has never been closer to "now" than in the coming weeks.

As the spring campaigning season opens, Western policymakers and military planners would be well advised to treat April 2026 not as a routine operational period, but as a moment demanding maximum strategic vigilance across the Indo-Pacific.

Note: This paper was completed on 17 March 2026. All events referenced are current as of that date. Casualty figures and operational details reflect the most recent available open-source reporting.