

"Hellscape" is the name for the U.S. Navy's strategic response should China invade Taiwan, writes Joseph E Fallon.

Naval News, reported June 16, 2024, "'Hellscape' envisions a battlefield filled with tens of thousands of unmanned ships, aircraft, and submarines all working in tandem to engage thousands of targets across the vast span of the West Pacific...to impede any attempted invasion force while causing the highest level of damage possible, allowing U.S. and allied forces adequate time to set up necessary logistics and forward-based forces in the West Pacific."

In a Washington Post interview, June 10, 2024, Admiral Samuel Paparo, commander of the Indo-Pacific Command said of "Hellscape": "I can't tell you what's in it," he replied when pressed about details. "But it's real and it's deliverable."

But can "Hellscape" prevent a Chinese invasion and occupation of Taiwan? Can it buy Admiral Paparo "the time [he needs] for the rest of everything?"

And what is "the rest of everything?"

"Hellscape's" problems are " (1) naval strength, (2) past failures of complex unmanned weaponry, (3) mirage of "the rest of everything," and (4) false assumption the U.S. will be fighting with support from allies while China will be fighting on its own.

First - Naval strength

Global firepower's 2024 ranking of the world's navies by naval power and fleet strength, shows the U.S. Navy has dropped to 4th place with 472 ships; North Korea is 3rd with 505 ships, China is 2nd with 730 ships, and Russia is 1st with 781 ships.

In launching "Hellscape," the U.S. Navy would rely on the U.S. Pacific Fleet (USPACFLT) "The U.S. Pacific Fleet...a theater-level component command of the United States Navy...consists of approximately 200 ships, 1,500 aircraft, and 150,000 military and civilian personnel." It exercises authority over the "Third and Seventh Fleets, Naval Air Force, Pacific, Naval Surface

Forces Pacific, Naval Submarine Force, Pacific, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, Commander Naval Forces Korea, Commander Naval Forces Japan, Commander Naval Forces Marianas."

On paper, the power of the U.S. Pacific Fleet looks impressive. In combat that power, which is constantly being enhanced with advanced technology, proved ineffective in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan.

In "Hellscape," however, the U.S. Pacific Fleet would not engage the enemy first. That would be done by "tens of thousands of weapons launched from unmanned ships, aircraft, and submarines."

Second "past failures of complex unmanned weaponry

Similar systems to Hellscape were deployed on a smaller scale in Afghanistan and failed.

Andrew Cockburn noted in "The Pentagon's Silicon Valley Problem: How Big Tech is losing the wars of the future," Harper's Magazine, June 2024, "The belief that software can solve problems of human conflict has a long history in U.S. war-making. Beginning in the late Sixties, the Air Force deployed a vast array of sensors across the jungles of Southeast Asia, masking the Ho Chi Minh trail along which North Vietnam supplied its forces in the south. Devised by scientists advising the Pentagon, the operation, code-named Igloo White, and designed to detect human activity by the sounds of marching feet, the smell of ammonia from urine, or the electronic sparks of engine ignitions, relayed information to giant IBM computers housed in a secret base in Thailand. The machines were the most powerful then in existence; they processed the signals to pinpoint enemy supply columns otherwise invisible under the jungle canopy. The scheme, in operation from 1967 to 1972 at a cost of at least hundreds of millions a year, was a total failure."

"In 2017, Google secured a contract for Project Maven...Project Maven fit into the grand tradition of many other high-tech weapons projects: ecstatic claims of prowess coupled with a disregard for real-world experience. The 'full motion video' to be processed through Google's technology was to be provided by Gorgon Stare, a system of pods arrayed with cameras mounted on Reaper drones. We can see everything,' the Washington Post had announced breathlessly in a report on the system's alleged

capabilities back when it was first unveiled. But, as the Air Force discovered, that was not true. A testing unit at Eglin Air Force Base revealed in a 2011 report that, among numerous other deficiencies, the cameras could not 'readily find and identify targets,' and its transmission rate was too slow. The testers concluded that it was 'not operationally effective' and should not be deployed in Afghanistan; the Air Force sent it

anyway."

These are examples of the "complexity bias...when we need to solve a problem, we may ignore simple solutions...sidestep the need to understand...[most importantly] complexity sells better."

As Roberto J. Gonzales wrote in "How Big Tech and Silicon Valley are Transforming the Military-Industrial Complex," Watson Institute International & Public Affairs, April 17, 2024, "Finally, we must ask what the costs might be for those who will be most directly affected by risky AI-enabled weapon and surveillance systems currently under development: members of the armed services and civilians who are in danger of being harmed by inadequately tested—or algorithmically flawed—technologies. By their very nature, VC [Venture Capitalist] firms seek rapid returns on investment by quickly

bringing a product to market, and then 'cashing out' by either selling the startup or going public. This means that VC funded defense tech companies are under pressure to produce prototypes quickly and then move to production before adequate testing has occurred. VC firms are interested in 'selling new modes of warfare to Pentagon officials not because this approach fits some strategic framework but because it aligns with their business model.' To put this in slightly different terms: the more influence VC and major tech firms can wield on Pentagon officials—and convince them of the dangers of a new kind of big-tech, AI enabled war—the quicker they can get their products into the marketplace. In the meantime, the Defense Department may find itself unprepared for future wars..."

Third — the mirage of "the rest of everything"

Presumably, "the rest of everything" is the arrival of a massive number of U.S. warships manned by thousands of personnel that will unleash devastating firepower at Chinese ships in the Taiwan Strait, those docked in Taiwanese ports, and the Chinese troops on Taiwan.

This is shadow over substance.

On March 9, 2023, Newsweek quoted Lyle Goldstein, director of Asia engagement at Defense Priorities, "China has interior lines, that is, at every point of combat, they can bring more firepower quicker, whereas we have exterior lines, we have to get the stuff there, it's much more difficult."

On February 9, 2024, The Heritage Foundation released "In 2024, the U.S. Military Is Weak...and That Should Scare You." In it, Dakota Woods wrote "At present, the U.S. military is roughly half the size it needs to be. Moreover, most of its primary equipment (planes, ships, tanks, etc.) is 30 to 40 years old, and soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and guardians are training only a fraction of what they should to be competent in battle." In March 2024, CSIS report, "Dilemmas of Deterrence: The United States' Smart New Strategy Has Six Daunting Trade-offs," noted "Using defense resources made available by decades of rapid economic growth...Beijing now possesses roughly 1,000 medium-

range ballistic missiles with a range of between 1,000 and 3,000 kilometers and 500 intermediate-range ballistic missiles with a range of between 3,000 and 5,500 kilometers. If a war were to break out, the PLA could now target nearly all U.S. forces within hundreds of miles of the Chinese coast."

On May 9, 2024, Stars & Stripes reported "U.S. military bases in the Indo-Pacific region are sorely lacking hardened aircraft shelters, leaving them vulnerable to devastating airstrikes in a potential conflict with China, lawmakers warned. Recent war games show the U.S. would lose 90% of its aircraft on the ground, rather than in air combat, due to insufficient base protection..." "Strikes on U.S. bases could immobilize vital air assets, disrupt logistical chains, and significantly weaken our ability to respond in a conflict."

China's ballistic missiles can reach the first and second island chains. They can inflict maximum damage on U.S. naval and air bases in Okinawa and Japan proper and destroy "drone motherships far outside the first island chain. They can devastate Guam, linchpin of the second island chain.

And where is the U.S. Navy's necessary personnel for a war in the Taiwan Strait?

According to Navy Times, February 21, 2024, in 2023, "the Navy hit a grim milestone for the first time in its history... It missed its recruiting targets by thousands of new sailors,

as each military branch "with the exception of the Marine Corps" struggled to bring young Americans into the enlisted ranks... 'I think we can absorb one year of missing mission,' [meeting enlistment goals] Vice Adm. Brendan McLane, commander of Naval Surface Forces, said at the Surface Navy Association's annual conference in January [2024]. 'Two years that's going to be a problem, that's going to have an effect.'"

What has been the U.S. Navy's solution to being shorthanded?

According to the Associated Press, January 27, 2024, "The U.S. Navy is starting to enlist individuals who didn't graduate from high school or get a GED, marking the second time in about a year that the service has opened the door to lower-performing recruits as it struggles to meet enlistment goals."

Where are the U.S. Navy's necessary armaments?

On August 29, 2022, The Wall Street Journal warned "The war in Ukraine has depleted

American stocks of some types of ammunition and the Pentagon has been slow to replenish its arsenal, sparking concerns among U.S. officials that American military readiness could be jeopardized by the shortage."

This is separate from the depletion of U.S. stockpiles by armaments shipped to Taiwan.

What has been the response of the U.S. government?

According to Stars & Stripes, June 7, 2024, "The United States is providing another \$225 million in munitions to Ukraine."

On June 19, 2024, Newsweek reported "The U.S. has approved a \$360 million arms sale to Taiwan, including missiles and drones..."

This would indicate the U.S. Government does not believe America's military readiness is in jeopardy. This would imply the U.S. Navy has the necessary weaponry to launch "Hellscape" and then successfully engage the Chinese Navy.

All three assumptions are false as documented by the General Accounting Office (GAO). On May 1, 2024, GAO released its investigative report "MILITARY READINESS: Actions Needed for DOD to Address Challenges across the Air, Sea, Ground, and Space Domains."

Regarding the U.S. Navy, the GAO report read "We have reported extensively on the sustainment challenges facing the Navy's surface ships, submarines, and aircraft carriers in the last several years...We have also reported that sustainment challenges hinder the Navy's ability to generate naval forces for deployment..."

In prior reports, we found that fewer aircraft carriers and submarines are available for training and operation when their maintenance is not completed in time. The Navy will have difficulty addressing aircraft carrier and submarine maintenance delays, backlogs, and other sustainment challenges given the poor condition of infrastructure at the Navy's four public shipyards...

The GAO report continued, "In prior reports, we found that the Navy routinely assigned fewer crewmembers to its ships than its workload studies have determined are needed to safely operate and maintain them...Further, we also found that the data the Navy uses to monitor the personnel readiness of the fleet are not sufficiently reliable, which leads to inflated numbers of sailors who appear to be qualified for their positions..."

The Heritage Foundation's "2024 Index of U.S. Military Strength" found the "disconnect between strategy, plans, and resourcing persists...its capacity score will probably remain "very weak" for the foreseeable future...The overall capability score for the Navy remains "marginal" with downward pressure as the Navy's technological edge narrows against peer competitors China and Russia..."

The Navy's readiness score remains "weak." This is due primarily to the Navy's persistent struggle to recapitalize antiquated, inadequate maintenance infrastructure and workforce to meet current needs."

In "Empty Bins in a Wartime Environment: The Challenge to the U.S. Defense Industrial Base," 2023, CSIS reported: "In a major regional conflict—such as a war with China in the Taiwan Strait—the United States would likely run out of some munitions—such as long-range, precision-guided munitions...in less than one week..."

Fourth —the false assumption the U.S. will be fighting with support from allies while China will be fighting on its own

In a war with China, the U.S. cannot expect to receive military support from NATO, EU, AUKUS, or the Quad.

In "Two-Theater Tragedy: A Reluctant Europe Cannot Easily Escape a Sino-American War Over Taiwan," War on the Rocks, April 10, 2024, Tim Sweijts and Paul van Hooft, observed "Despite expressing a growing interest in the Indo-Pacific, Europeans have not seriously considered acting on behalf of Taiwan in case of a war between the United States and China. In any case, European countries lack the capacity to do so..."

AUKUS, the security pact of the U.S., the U.K., and Australia, is negated by the "tyranny

of distance." By the time British or Australian forces reached the Taiwan Strait, (a minimum of full speed steaming from UK advance bases in the Gulf) the war would be over.

The Quad, consisting of the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India, is a diplomatic forum on strategic security, not a military alliance.

The only allies in the Indo-Pacific Theater that have the military strength and geographic proximity to assist the U.S. in a war in the Taiwan Strait are Japan and South Korea.

Global firepower ranks the military strength of South Korea as 5 th in the world, Japan 7 th .

Both countries have defense pacts with the U.S. and both host major U.S. bases.

According to Military Bases.com, there are 23 U.S. military bases in Japan, including the headquarters of the 7 th Fleet at Yokohama.

The most strategic asset is Okinawa, Japan's southernmost prefecture. The main island of Okinawa is 354 nautical miles from Taiwan. Hateruma, the southernmost inhabited island in the archipelago, is 115 nautical miles from Taiwan.

South Korea, which hosts 15 U.S. military bases and over 24,000 U.S. military personnel, is 788 nautical miles from Taiwan.

In his Newsweek interview, Lyle Goldstein said he does 'not think China wants to fire first against U.S. forces. They want to force the United States into a position where the U.S. has to make that horrible decision to ignite a U.S.-China war."

"Hellscape" is "that horrible decision." China invades Taiwan. In response, the U.S. attacks China's invading forces. U.S. military bases in Japan and South Korea become legitimate targets of war. All within range of China's ballistic missiles. Should Japanese and South Korean military forces assist the U.S., then Japanese and South Korean military installations and dual use facilities become legitimate targets as well.

And China would not be alone. It has allies, Russia and North Korea. North Korea could make provocative military moves against South Korea along the 160 mile DMZ and within the disputed maritime border in the Yellow/West Sea, the Northern Limit Line.

With an active military manpower of 1,320,000 military provocations by North Korea could compel Seoul and Washington to keep their forces in readiness in South Korea and not deploy to the Taiwan Strait.

Then there is Russia. In June 2021, The Russian Pacific Fleet conducted a historic naval exercise deep into the Central Pacific. On June 13, 2021, in "Russian Pacific Fleet breaks out: First exercise in Central

Pacific," J.E. Dyer, wrote "Back in 2013, Russia sent the interesting, but largely missed, signal that she could approach Guam by air, via a path along which the U.S. had no rapid-reaction interdiction capabilities until after the Russian bombers were in air-

launched cruise missile range. In the geography Russia demonstrated, Guam was an essentially undefended risk. Nothing has really changed the dynamics of that

conundrum in the years since."

The presence of Russia's Pacific Fleet close to Guam would disrupt U.S. naval logistics. U.S. naval supply lines do not need to be broken just impeded to facilitate China's invasion of Taiwan.

Without secure logistics and proper capability, capacity, and readiness for war with China in the Taiwan Strait, launching "Hellscape" could turn into the U.S Navy's worst nightmare.

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