The Impact of Sea Versus Land Power in a Taiwan Conflict

David Sarabia

With Xi Jinping reportedly having directed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to be ready to invade Taiwan as early as 2027 – and with Washington committed by the Taiwan Relations Act to "maintain[ing] the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan" – it is not surprising that defense planners seem very focused upon what such a conflict might look like and what the outcome might be. Today, both think tanks and government institutions are reported to be conducting wargames and scenario exercises for a Taiwan conflict to explore such questions.

Yet the contest between the United States and the People's Republic of China's (PRC) is only the latest example of Great Power Competitions that have occurred throughout history and that have frequently presaged armed conflict and wider global transformations. Today, it is the forceful unification of Taiwan with mainland China that has the greatest potential to bring the U.S. and the PRC into armed conflict, and it therefore must be studied closely. The PRC military objective would be to rapidly take Taiwan by asserting regional military superiority before the U.S. and its allies and partners could provide support.[1] To that end, China has modernized its naval and land forces. While the U.S. arguably maintains overall superiority in military forces[2] – and while some observers, and perhaps even Chinese officials, still question whether the PLA will be fully prepared for such a conflict in the near future – American military dominance may not be enduring, correctly postured, or sufficient to meet this challenge.

Capabilities in the sea and land domains likely will be decisive in any Sino-American competition over Taiwan, despite advances in

new domains of warfare, and it is important to understand how such capabilities would interact in time of war. While it is understandable that much emphasis is now being placed upon contemporary wargames, however, there may also be things we can learn about such a potential future conflict from the study of history.

Specifically, I believe that analysis and comparison of sea versus land power in three case studies of conflicts in the past – Athens-Sparta, Great Britain-Germany, and United States-Japan – can help U.S. policymakers understand the need for a robust combination of sea and land power, as well as both diplomatic and strategic engagement with U.S. allies and partners, and even with the PRC itself. This essay will integrate lessons from each of the case studies and provide recommendations to U.S. policymakers on how to prevent a repeat of such outcomes. By applying lessons about sea and land power, about interdependence, and about fear, honor, and interest to a potential conflict with the PRC over Taiwan, the U.S. can improve its chances of ensuring peace in the Western Pacific.

Athens vs. Sparta

The Peloponnesian War occurred from 431 to 401 BC between the Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta. Earlier, the Greek city-states had formed an alliance in which Athens, the dominant sea power, and Sparta, the dominant land power, coordinated defensively to repulse Persian invaders. Following the defeat of the Persian Empire, however, Athens and Sparta began a competition for control of the Aegean Sea. Despite the goodwill gained and interdependence that developed while facing an external threat, their rivalry turned bitter.

The Peloponnesian War that resulted has been likened to a struggle between a "whale" and an "elephant."[3] During the early part of the conflict, Athens relied on sea power while hiding behind its walls under the "Periclean strategy." The Periclean strategy – so called after the Athenian statesman Pericles – employed strategic patience, knowing that the Spartan military could not cut off the Athenian civilization without sea power. Being an agrarian society, Sparta did not have the finances to develop a robust sea power and had to rely

upon allies who did. Even with allies, however, Sparta was not able to effectively threaten Athenian sea lines of communication. Conversely, Athens did not have the capability to invade Sparta, not only because Athens had focused its energies primarily upon naval power, but also because the famously militarized society of Sparta then fielded what was perhaps the best army in Greece. Such a struggle highlighted the inherent difficulty of gaining an advantage when each side was only a land power or sea power but not both.

During the latter period of the Peloponnesian War, Athens forsook the Periclean strategy and overextended itself in attempting to take over the island of Sicily. Thereafter, Athens lost much of its capability as it suffered defeats and abandonment by allies. Athenian adventurism alarmed Sparta, however, and spurred the Spartans to conclude that they must take the (for them) radical step of committing themselves to sea power to ensure the continuation of their regime. Persia, Greece's old enemy, offered naval resources and basing to Sparta in order to reduce the capability of Athens to control the Aegean. As a result, Sparta was able to defeat the Athenian naval forces and eventually forced the capitulation of Athens, as the sea no longer served as a means to sustain its war effort. The turning point was a commitment by Sparta to developing and employing a force that could control the sea while still maintaining its formidable land force, demonstrating the need to have both capabilities in order to resolve the conflict in its favor.

Three lessons can be learned from the competition between Athens and Sparta. First, developing and employing *only* sea or land power may result in a stalemate – that between a whale and an elephant – because each side lacks the ability to gain decisive advantage against the other's most important capabilities. Second, although interdependence, whether political or economic, can provide a hedge against conflict, such a relationship can still be broken through increased competition. Lastly, as the great historian Thucydides stated, "fear, honor, and interest" can lead to engaging in such competitiveness.[4] Athens' geostrategic interest and Sparta's fear spurred their conflict. The Peloponnesian War may thus offer lessons for a developing conflict between the U.S. and China. Nevertheless, that conflict occurred thousands of years ago. A competition in Europe

during the beginning of the 20th Century, though, can also provide lessons applicable to a Taiwan scenario.

Great Britain vs. Germany

World War I, which began in 1914, had many causes. One of the leading causes, however, was the threat perceived by Great Britain from the rise of Imperial Germany since the late 1800s. Desiring what Kaiser Wilhelm II called a "place in the sun," Germany sought to expand its status and sphere of influence around the globe, fueled by the newfound political and technological power of industrialization and the pride of the Wilhelmine regime and the recent unification of Germany under Prussian domination.[5]

During this time period, an American naval strategist, Alfred Thayer Mahan, wrote his seminal work, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*. Mahan advocated the use of blue-water naval forces to ensure control of the seas as a "commons," thus ensuring the continued flow of goods to sustain the growth of industrialized nations while denying their use to enemies.[6]

Kaiser Wilhelm II, although personally an Anglophile, fully adopted Mahan's reasoning, fixated upon the importance of (and status conveyed by) sea power, and empowered Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz to develop and employ a naval force that could contest Great Britain's hitherto almost all-powerful Royal Navy on the high seas. Germany, at this time, had already developed into a formidable land power on the continent of Europe, having easily defeated both the Austrian Empire and France in Otto von Bismarck's wars of German unification, and with historic rivalries still persisting against France and Russia. Germany's relations with Great Britain prior to its naval buildup had been one of interdependence, for example in steel production and extensive commercial trade, rather than rivalry.[7]

However, once Imperial Germany began building its naval forces, Great Britain began to view Germany as an existential threat. In response, Great Britain developed next-generation battleships, the "Dreadnoughts," and sought to employ them on the high seas to guarantee its continued dominance. Germany, a latecomer to naval

ship building, appropriated the Dreadnought design to produce its own warships and set about building a formidable fleet. As a result, Great Britain and Germany were set for rivalry on the sea and on the land, driven – as Thucydides might have predicted – by fear and honor respectively.

Interestingly, when conflict actually came both Germany and Great Britain were reluctant to risk losing the large investments they had made in their naval forces. During multiple engagements, and most prominently in the Battle of Jutland, the admirals chose to back off rather than fully engaging their forces, in part due to the threats presented by relatively new countervailing technological developments, in particular the torpedo and the submarine. Just as on land after 1914, where trench warfare on the continent had resulted in a stalemate with millions of casualties, the seas thus also reached a stalemate.

Such a situation favored Great Britain as an essentially *status quo* maritime power, however, as the standoff prevented the German fleet's access to the high seas as Mahanian theory required; Germany could only control portions of the North Sea. As a result, the Allied powers could continue to receive support from neutral powers – including, before it too joined the war, the United States, from which convoys steadily braved German submarines to bring essential supplies to Britain and France.

Unforeseen to the powers at the time, such submarines, through an unrestricted German campaign, would have greater impact upon naval affairs than the vaunted Dreadnought. Eventually, Allied use of the convoy system, using destroyer escorts, would negate the campaign's effectiveness and preserve Britain's critical supply lines, but Germany's U-boats demonstrated the potential power of novel technology and methods to transform the nature of warfare in any given battlespace. In part because of these technological changes, sea power remained vital to the war effort, as the eventual Anglo-German naval stalemate ensured that Britain avoided strangulation by the Kaiser's navy while Germany remained cut off from global trade by the Royal Navy blockade. With the arrival of U.S. military forces in 1917 and support from America's vast industrial capacity, the Allied

effort would eventually result in the capitulation of Germany. Although Great Britain dominated the maritime environment during World War I, it was thus the commitment of land forces to the European continent that ultimately decided the outcome of the war.

Thus, World War I highlighted the importance of factors of land and sea power, interdependence, and competitiveness much like those seen in connection with the Peloponnesian War, despite the thousands of years separating the two cases. Before the Peloponnesian War, Sparta, the land power, and Athens, the sea power, were interdependent and neither had a balanced combination of land and sea power.

In the same way, Germany, the land power, and Great Britain, the sea power, were initially friendly and neither contended with the other in its primary sphere of military power. When one state sought to balance land and sea power, however, dynamics of fear, honor, and interest helped produce a great power conflict. In that conflict, the side that ultimately achieved the best balance or combination of capabilities across those domains was the one that prevailed. Even with the introduction of technologies such as the submarine and the airplane – both of which would surely have appeared all but magical to the Athenians and Spartans – these earlier ancient Greek lessons still apply to the British and the Germans. A few decades later, moreover, the world would see another war with even more impressive technologies, also offering similar lessons.

United States vs. Japan

World War II lasted, for the United States, from 1941 to 1945, as Allied and Axis powers contended in Europe and in the Pacific. U.S. forces were late entries into the conflict, brought in by the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Imperial Japanese Navy. Imperial Japan had risen in prominence as an East Asian country that had adopted Western means of production and that desired colonies to fuel its continued industrialization and feed its militarized imperial pride. Japan had initially depended on the West for much of the technology for industrialization and destination markets, but Japan later increasingly

turned away due to its desire for self-sufficiency while pursuing its expansion.

Japan's growing power resulted in part from its ability to secure resources in the Western Pacific, and before long it began to appear – to both Japanese and American leaders – that only the United States could staunch Japan's expansion. Up to and through World War I, Japan had developed a dominant position in the region, expanding into Korea, China, and Siberia. Due to commitments in the Washington Treaty System and London Treaty, Japan was constrained in the tonnage of battleships it could produce, limiting Tokyo to a second-place rank globally, even though it still enjoyed a privileged regional position in East Asia.

Since Japan also ascribed to Mahan's theory, and because naval capability (*e.g.*, as used in the crushing defeat Japan had inflicted upon Russia in 1905) was considered a key element of Japan's prestige as a modern power, these overall limitations were considered an affront to Japanese pride. The conviction that the U.S. wished to limit Japan's "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" and Tokyo's belief in its own naval strength led Japan to attack the forward-deployed American Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor – and to invade the (then) U.S. colonial possession of the Philippines – as a matter of Thucydidean honor and interest.

With the initiation of hostilities during World War II, the conflict in the Pacific marked a dramatic change in which land and sea power alone did not secure victory. At sea, the new technology of the aircraft carrier would prove to be the dominant naval capability in the Pacific. Although battleships remained part of the fleet, air forces – and more specifically, air forces deployable from mobile naval platforms – would prove to be the critical capability to secure victory. After the Battle of Midway, the Japanese slowly lost the ability to control the sea lines of communication providing supplies to fuel their war effort. As U.S. naval air power gradually destroyed the Japanese fleet and U.S. Army and Marine forces retook Japanese-held island enclaves, American submarines ate into Japan's maritime trade. As such Allied naval, land, and air power grew relentlessly, backed by the abundant

industrial capacity of the United States, it ultimately overwhelmed the Japanese.

Although this was primarily a contest at sea, the U.S. employed a strategy of "island hopping" to take strategic islands that would extend U.S. land-based air cover and sea basing, and ultimately also provide bases for long-range bomber attacks on the Japanese homeland. As a result, the U.S. developed and employed amphibious operations capabilities in order to move from the sea to the land. Unable to stem the tide of the Allied advance, the Japanese even turned to suicide attacks against Allied invasion forces and prepared for a similarly suicidal, latch ditch resistance on the Home Islands. U.S. leaders decided to use atomic weapons against Japan, however, and thereby force a capitulation. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ushered in the nuclear age and arguably brought about the resolution of World War II in the Pacific. Ultimately though, the U.S. still needed a combination of naval and ground capabilities and the intent to use them to control the sea and land to end the war. (Even the use of atomic bombs was ultimately tied to land and sea power dynamics, in that U.S. officials decided to employ them in hopes of avoiding an invasion of Japan itself, which would have been extremely costly in light of lessons learned about Japanese resistance during the "island-hopping" campaign.)

Again, the lessons here are much like those of the Peloponnesian War and World War I, despite their different time periods, technologies, and geographies. At the turn of the 20th Century, the United States, the naval power, and Japan, the land power, created something of a "whale versus elephant" dynamic. However, honor and interest pushed Japan to develop its naval power, overtaking the U.S. as the dominant naval power in the Pacific. Eventually, this competition – and Japan's perceived interest in capitalizing upon its naval strength before U.S. industrial advantages could change the balance – led to the attack on Pearl Harbor, heralded by the deteriorating interdependence between the two countries. The U.S. ultimately achieved victory by balancing land and naval power. The use of the aircraft carriers, long-range bombers, amphibious operations, and the introduction of nuclear weapons facilitated the resolution of the conflict even over vast distances. Still, some

fundamental lessons remained despite all this revolutionary technology, echoing the previous case studies. These lessons may still be of use today, many years later, as the United States now again faces Great Power Competition, particularly from the PRC. The lessons from these case studies are as applicable to the most likely flashpoint, a cross-Taiwan Strait conflict, as they were to past conflicts.

United States vs. China

A critical component of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) enduring pursuit for power and domestic legitimacy is unification with the Republic of China.[8] President Xi Jinping has made "re-unification" with Taiwan a goal for at least 2049, as a means to restore Chinese honor after what is said to have been a "Century of Humiliation" China faced at European and Japanese hands beginning in the 1800s.[9]

By the late 1980s, Taiwan had successfully transitioned from an autocratic regime to a vibrant democracy upheld by a strong economy with several especially impressive industrial sectors, particularly microelectronics. Today, the existence of a democratically-elected government in Taiwan poses what may be perceived as an essentially existential threat to the CCP, not just by confounding the CCP's narrative of its duty to "re-unify" all of "China," but also by demonstrating that ethnically Chinese people are more than capable of living, and thriving, under democratic rule and free of Communist autocracy. Although Washington is not a treaty ally and does not provide Taiwan formal diplomatic recognition, American interests have committed the United States to support Taiwan through supplying arms according to the Taiwan Relations Act, communiques,[10] and assurances.

Prior to the 1990s, the PLA focused on providing layered ground defenses and defense-in-depth approaches allowing an adversary to spend its strength trying to penetrate to the interior of the mainland. The Gulf War of 1991 and the 1996 Sino-U.S. tensions over Taiwan demonstrated to the CCP and the PLA, however, that a conscripted force with low technology would not meet China's geopolitical needs. As a result, the PLA began a decades-long process of "mechanization"

and "informationization" in order to be able to counter a high technology foe such as the United States,[11] and to win a "local war under informationized conditions."[12] A local war for China is considered to occur in the "near seas" close to the coastline, which fits the specific conditions necessary to unify Taiwan with mainland China.[13] The interest and ability to control the Taiwan Strait is directly linked to the qualitative improvements seen across the PRC's military forces.

In the most recent U.S. National Defense Strategy, the Biden administration continues to follow the longstanding U.S. policy of not taking a position on the future of Taiwan and urging both sides to resolve their differences peacefully, while President Biden has repeatedly said in news interviews that the United States will defend Taiwan.[14] For the United States, Taiwan represents a critical location within the "First Island Chain" that runs from the western coast of the Philippines up past Taiwan to southern Japan, thus controlling China's access to the Pacific and transit through the East and South China Seas.[15] Although having military forces based in Japan and South Korea, the United States does not have military forces on Taiwan (except for training missions) to provide a deterrent to invasion, and must therefore contend with the "tyranny of distance."[16]

To allow the United States, its allies, and partners time to deploy, the Taiwanese aim to use a "porcupine strategy" to delay PLA efforts to take the island.[17] Unfortunately, U.S. forces might require weeks if not months to deploy adequate sea and land power to the Taiwan Strait.

Analysis

By current estimates, the U.S. still holds an advantage in sea and air power vis-à-vis the PRC, particularly outside the First Island Chain;[18] however, it does not contest for land control in China. For China, although it can likely control the near seas around Taiwan and its forces have been steadily improving, the PLA probably still cannot successfully take the island at present, given its air, land, and sea capabilities and the difficulty of mounting such a large operation across a long expanse of open water against armed resistance.[19] The

current situation therefore favors a continuation of the status quo—in other words, a stalemate. This situation parallels the early stages of the rivalries covered in the case studies above.

By 2049, however, the PLA will likely have transitioned to a "far seas" capability enabling global operations in order to secure PRC's sea lines of communication, ensuring continued access to resources.[20] The PLA will also have realized its anti-access and anti-denial (A2/AD) strategy to keep the U.S. beyond the "Second Island Chain" – running, loosely speaking, from Japan down through Guam and to West Papua – which will prevent forces from deploying in support of Taiwan. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) may by then also have provided forward basing across the Pacific, extending its sea and land power.

As for the economic interdependence of China and the United States, that relationship will likely continue at some level despite mutual suspicions. The U.S. and China mutually benefit from the interdependence in their global commercial relationship, and both also depend upon Taiwan's huge semiconductor industry. As a result, interdependence can provide a hedge against conflict over the Taiwan Strait. However, just as our case studies demonstrated with the initial interdependence among the rivals in each case, interdependence between U.S. and China is not a guarantee of future stability.

Already, the United States and China are taking steps to insulate supplies of critical component technologies from dependence on foreign adversaries, reminiscent of Japan's drive for self-sufficiency prior to World War II. By 2049, if China's BRI is successful in creating commercial and infrastructure ties separate from the United States and the PLA can assure access to resources on the land and the sea, then conflict will more likely occur.

The lessons from Thucydides concerning "fear, honor, and interest" are particularly relevant to avoiding a conflict with China. The CCP has staked its legitimacy on unification with Taiwan. Therefore, a formal Taiwanese declaration of independence would constitute a PRC red line that would likely cause military action. In such an instance, Chinese honor and geostrategic interest would likely

override any economic interests that would otherwise tend to prevent conflict, as well as any fear of U.S. intervention.[21] Meanwhile, China's rising power and assertiveness have begun to provoke a counterreaction in the United States, which is now much more focused on competitive strategy with China than it was eight years ago. Just as fear, honor, and interests spurred the great powers in the case studies to compete and ultimately war with each other, China and the United States would be more likely to enter into a conflict if these attitudes could not be managed.

Each of the case studies demonstrates factor relevant to this current geopolitical dilemma. Irrespective of time, distance, or technology, conflict has repeatedly occurred between great powers based on those factors. It is an open question whether the new domains of space and information, or capabilities such as nuclear weapons, will change the applicability of the lessons from the three case studies. However, such new domains and capabilities do not obviate the need both to control the sea lines of communications and to occupy territory in order to impose a state's geopolitical will, just as new technologies in the past such as aircraft and submarines did not change these fundamentals in WWI and WWII. As can be seen, over thousands of years, over thousands of miles, and despite great leaps in technology, the lessons from the case studies have endured. Consequently, U.S. policymakers may have options available based on how well they learn such lessons.

Recommendations and Conclusion

In each of the case studies, conflict ensued when one state attempted to create a strong naval and land force, just as China is working towards by 2049. The U.S. must therefore maintain its military advantage to deter, and if need be, prevail against PRC aggression. Using sea and land power, the United States must maintain sea lines of communication across the Western Pacific, as the U.S. rebuilt its own in the face of Japanese power through "island-hopping" in World War II, to allow continued access to resources and markets as well as secure supply lines if a conflict arises over Taiwan.

This is an enduring truth, but the capabilities and technologies needed to ensure such lines of communication evolve with the times. In practical terms, this means today that America cannot place all its trust in "legacy" capabilities – with aircraft carrier battle groups here perhaps standing in for the Dreadnaughts of old – and must instead invest in smaller, long-endurance surface vessels, no larger than frigates, and undersea combatants with multi-mission capabilities such as anti-submarine, coastal-bombardment, anti-air, anti-submarine, and anti-ship armaments. In the air, high-endurance air vehicles armed with long-range, guided missiles for use against air, ship, and land targets should be developed and deployed. Such platforms may be manned or unmanned, but they must be networked and supported by a robust command, control, communications, and intelligence (C^3I) architecture, as well as surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities to ensure accurate targeting. These capabilities would become the modern-day equivalent of the long-range bomber escorts during World War II and destroyer escorts of World War I.

U.S. policymakers must also ensure that Taiwan receives weapons capabilities it needs to deny the PLA sea access to the island. Aerial- and submarine-launched mines and improved cruise missile defenses with countermeasures, for example, can provide a barrier around points of embarkation to the island and around key amphibious landing objectives on it, and measures can be taken to make Taiwan "indigestible" to any invader that does reach its shores. Lastly, the U.S. must deploy at least a battalion-sized unit of U.S. military members to Taiwan, in addition to the 200 trainers augmenting the special operations forces already on the island.

Such an inclusion of U.S. military members on the island is not to provide a capability to repel the PRC, but rather to provide a clear deterrent signal that the United States will honor its support commitments to Taiwan. Much as with the U.S. Army brigade stationed in West Berlin from 1961 until 1994, such a deployment would make clear to China that it could not hope to undertake aggression in Taiwan without imperiling the lives of American servicemembers, thus increasing the odds that Washington would be drawn into any fight. Without such a signal, the United States would

repeat Great Britain's mistake preceding World War I in not committing to the continent.

The capabilities outlined for sea and air power will require basing to be effective in the Western Pacific. In addition, such basing would provide an umbrella for economic ties and security with allies and partners. As such, the U.S. policymakers must seek opportunities for basing and commerce with strategically located states across the Western Pacific that could be used in defense of Taiwan. The U.S. should continue to court such partners – as has been done, for instance, with Palau – and, when prudent, even enter into alliances,[22] while also creating useful fora for discussion and policy coordination, such as with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and Micronesia.

Such moves will help counter the military implications of the PRC's BRI as well as preventing a vacuum for PLA Navy deployments to fill in the future. In terms of interdependence, the United States could invite the PRC into select fora as an equal partner on a case-by-case, region-by-region basis. The result would be a strengthening of ties with the PRC on the part of U.S. allies and partners as well, who would also increase their influence with the PRC. More such "mesh" interdependence would enable greater bonds than the bilateral interdependence that fractured with each of the case studies in this essay. Although interdependence cannot guarantee prevention of a U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan, meshed interdependence can provide additional off-ramp opportunities, dampening escalation by increasing the number of potentially countervailing strategic considerations, such as Chinese concern over alienating BRI partners providing access, basing, or overflight to PLA forces seeking to keep China's lines of communication open.

Both the United States and China are likely to misunderstand or confront each other, as have so many rivals in the past, based on dynamics of fear, honor, and interest. U.S. policymakers must move beyond "Track 1.5" and "Track 2" dialogues, which are unofficial meetings between PRC and U.S. private citizens. The U.S. must continue to attempt engagement with the PRC through official diplomatic, economic, and military channels. U.S. members selected

for such interactions, moreover, must be well-versed in Chinese culture, ethics, language, and current national interests, and must coordinate strategy prior to engaging their PRC counterparts. The fora outlined for creating interdependence are a good place to start, in particular with concerns for securing sea routes against piracy and other threats. Only through opportunities to enhance communications, can the U.S. diminish any misunderstandings with regard to fear, honor, and interest. In so doing, the U.S. will help alleviate the fear, honor, and interest issues of previous power competitions.

Drawing upon the insights of history, U.S. policymakers can help reduce the risks of war suggested by the abovementioned case-study rivalries, by applying lessons about sea and land power, about interdependence, and about fear, honor, and interest to a potential conflict with the PRC over Taiwan. Such approaches require clear communication, a consistent approach, and humility to ensure that the prevailing winds of history lead away from conflict rather than into it.

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About the Author:

David Sarabia *is a doctoral student in Missouri State University's School of Defense and Strategic Studies. He is a retired United States Air Force intelligence officer and a veteran of Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM. The views he expresses herein are entirely his own, and do not necessarily reflect those of anyone else in the Air Force or the U.S. Government.*

Notes

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