

The Talented Gamers

Part 5 – Opening Pandora’s Box

Maj. Anthony M. Formica, U.S. Army

Gen. Jasmine Smith closed the door to the Situation Room and moved to take a seat opposite from the chief of staff of the Army. She was the last service chief in the room, and she had just pulled out her briefing materials when President Vincent Franchi himself entered.

“Sit down, sit down everyone, I want this to be quick,” Franchi enjoined the group as he pulled out his seat and unbuttoned his suit, gesturing all the while for the officers to return to their seats after instinctively standing up at attention. “First question: can we take Taiwan?”

There was a pregnant pause, and Franchi glanced up over his reading glasses at the chair of the Joint Chiefs, Army Gen. Kathryn MacDougal. “That’s really a question for you, Kate,” the president said bemusedly. MacDougal’s face was contorted with discomfort, but she adhered to the time-honored military tradition of directly answering the question that had been posed to her.

“Mr. President, we can,” she stated flatly.

“Risks?” the president asked.

“Sir, this would expand the entire war effort well beyond anything that our AI models had forecast. We would have to throw the entire DCF into the fight and probably have to mobilize the rest of the joint force for contingency operations.”

“Why the entire DCF?” he said.

“Mr. President, if I may?” Smith interjected before MacDougal could answer. Franchi nodded and MacDougal sat back in her seat, her look apprehensive, as Smith continued. “Sir, we’ve optimized 3-D ink production and delivery to provide forces for the freedom of navigation mission. Most recently, that meant that we relied heavily on contracts with our Thai

allies; their facilities in Rayong are some of the best in the world and were much closer to the front lines than our Arizona plants. We were producing on a schedule designed to win the Straits fight, and to do it cheaply; that meant limiting U.S.-based production.”

“And our AI models did not predict the possibility of widening the war to include Taiwan?” Franchi’s tone was earnest, nonthreatening.

“Several of them did sir, yes,” Smith replied. “And we did maintain some Arizona production as a contingency, but mostly to ensure freedom of navigation around Taiwan. We told the algorithms to discard the possibility of a full-scale invasion because we didn’t think that was a realistic scenario—we didn’t think you’d be willing to risk that sort of escalation. Result: if we were to invade Taiwan, we’d need to throw our ink facilities into overdrive and marshal every printer we currently have for the operation.”

Franchi looked focused, clearly processing the background information as it was presented to him.

“Additionally, Mr. President, we’re fairly

Maj. Anthony M.

Formica, U.S. Army, serves as the 82nd Airborne Division’s Information Warfare Task Force. He holds a BS from the U.S. Military Academy and an MA from Yale University’s Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, which he obtained through the Downing Scholars Program. Formica deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom with 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, and in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve-North as a company commander with the 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne). He has also served as an observer-controller at the Joint Readiness Training Center.

confident the Chinese are attempting to buy ownership of our Asian allies' production facilities now that they've seen how instrumental speed of resupply is for us."

This last remark came from the treasury secretary, who Franchi nodded at in affirmation before putting his pad down and squaring up to the table.

"Here's the reality, fellas. I'm not angry that you discounted the invasion scenarios, Jasmine; I never indicated that I wanted or was even considering

to convince them that he was reluctant to take the step of invading Taiwan, but that he was theoretically open to the possibility. She saw her opportunity and grabbed for it.

"Sir, regardless of whether or not we take Taiwan, the Chinese are giving every indication that they assume we will. They are massing several divisions in Fujian; they're mobilizing two separate corps on the Korean border. They will almost certainly take

“Taiwan is nonnegotiable for Beijing. They accepted our behavior in the Strait because it was naked aggression on their part, and because nobody died. China's self-conceived sovereignty wasn't on the line.”

the possibility of quote-unquote 'liberating Taiwan.' Twenty-four hours ago, I was convinced that this whole China thing would be over with today. But then the picture changed: the 10 percent of our population who still pays attention to and cares about events in the real world is demanding action. Beijing appears—" the president paused to look back at the treasury secretary "—to have dusted off its competition playbook and is buying up the assets that make our new war machine run."

The president paused and looked around as if gauging each attentive face.

"And, from a narrative sense," he continued, "I can see how our rationale for the Strait dovetails with a rationale for Taiwan: upholding—resuscitating—the liberal world order that we abandoned sixteen years ago. I get that: a clear message that America is back."

"But," the president said, pausing to tap the table slowly, deliberately, several times. "Taiwan is nonnegotiable for Beijing. They accepted our behavior in the Strait because it was naked aggression on their part, and because nobody died. China's self-conceived sovereignty wasn't on the line. That would not be the case in Taiwan and I do not see any scenario where this does not become a full-scale war played out across the entirety of the Indo-Pacific region. A lot of human blood is at risk this time around."

Smith got the distinct sense that Franchi was making a sales pitch. He seemed to be simultaneously trying

Korea hostage if we make any aggressive moves toward Taiwan. I've also seen several AI models that show them taking Korea anyway, mostly as a face-saving gesture, even without American aggression. They have a form of domestic politics to consider as well."

"All politics are local," Franchi assented, pensive. "Kate, what's your recommendation?"

MacDougal leaned forward and swept her eyes across every officer, pausing briefly and contemptuously on Smith before turning to address Franchi. "Mr. President, I strongly recommend against invasion."

"Yeah, that's fine, but I'm not asking you for a recommendation to invade Taiwan. I'm asking you for your recommendation about liberating it. We deploy a sizeable force to Korea as a deterrent or defensive measure—you'll of course come back to me with the specifics—and we use the DCF to sweep the Chinese out of Taipei." Franchi's eyes twinkled as he went on, and Smith knew she'd won him over.

"Still, sir, no. I maintain that we would be committing ourselves to a prolonged war that I am not confident we can win. And it goes without saying, sir, but I do not think the Chinese will confine themselves to actions in Korea and Taiwan. This will quickly become a wide-open war. That's saying nothing about what our other geopolitical competitors will do with the free hand we'd be giving them."

"Noted. Scott?" Franchi's gaze next fell on the Army chief of staff sitting across from Smith. He and

MacDougal were the only service chiefs older than forty, vestiges of the pre-talent management force. They were certainly experienced, certainly smart, but imbued with an unhealthy sentimentality and aversion to risk. He seconded Gen. MacDougal's recommendation not to invade.

He was the last service chief to do so. As Franchi worked his way around the table, every other senior military officer gave their recommendation to proceed with the Taiwanese liberation—which was really their assent to let the DCF liberate Taiwan while their services set conditions in the Korean theater. The Air Force expressed confidence that it could own the skies; the Navy was certain it could strangle China's commerce in concert with its regional allies, especially given the situation in the Strait of Malacca. The president came lastly to Smith.

"How quickly can you seal this thing up, make it a fait accompli?" the president asked.

"To strike and destroy Chinese forces in Taiwan itself, assuming I use the entirety of the DCF? AI models predict four days, tops, sir. We can push that timetable left if I get some additional assets from the other services, aircraft especially, and retrofit them with additional printers and ink. I think I'll probably need twelve hours to build out the roster of commanders I'll need for this size of an operation."

"Approved," Franchi said, standing up. "Here are my orders: secure Korea. Seize Taiwan. Plan for and mitigate risk in the other combatant commands; I'll want to see options there in two hours. Meanwhile, Kate, make sure Jasmine gets the support she needs; DCF is the priority for funding and materiel."

Turning to Smith directly, he concluded, "I trust you'll find the most talented people to fight this one, Gen. Smith. Get ink production up and running. I want to have the DCF ready for follow-on operations worldwide as soon as the red flag comes down over Taiwan. Meanwhile," he said slyly, "I've got some allies to get on board. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen." The president strode for the exit amid a flurry of salutes.

Smith began gathering her briefing materials and placing them in her briefcase. She started walking toward the exit herself but was cut off by Gen. MacDougal. "Do you actually buy that bit about all politics being local?" MacDougal asked coldly.

Smith flashed a smile in return. "Kate, of course I don't. All politics are personal."

MacDougal took a half step back in evident disgust. Then, gathering herself, she turned to leave the room. "I hope we haven't set the kingdom on fire by giving you smug wunderkinder the keys to it," she hissed as she walked out. ■