

The American Maginot Line



Maj. Timothy M. Dwyer, U.S. Army

I'm not sure when I dozed off, but it couldn't have been too long ago. I rolled over and checked the time on my phone.

1:17 a.m.

I still had a few hours before I needed to get up and head to the office. The bed was warm and comfortable, the bathroom had running water; I was safe. These were all things that I'd be giving up as soon as I left the house and started the deployment. It was the same as always, but different this time. I wasn't heading to some plush FOB in Afghanistan to spend twelve months chasing terrorists. This time it was China; this time it was a war like my grandfather fought. It was war against someone who actually had a chance.

I still couldn't believe China had manipulated a virus and unleashed it on the world. Of course, China denied it; that wasn't the surprise. But unleashing it in the first place was unbelievable. I didn't even know what a telomere was until I heard on CNN that China had made the virus to shorten them. It was plain evil. To then use the international response as an excuse for "active defense" just so China could grab Taiwan? That solidified it. China had to be stopped, and that's what we were going

to do. Our rolling stock should be at the port by now; today we fly out to Hawai'i then onto our staging areas. I checked the time again.

1:19 a.m.

A sound came from the hallway. Aileen was probably up; she was taking this deployment pretty hard. I slipped out of the blankets, careful not to wake my wife, placed my feet on the carpet, and slowly stood up. Now would not be the time to tweak my back checking on the baby. I shuffled across the bedroom floor, knees and ankles cracking loudly. That's when I heard our Alexa talking in Aileen's room. How many times have I told her not to play with Alexa after bedtime?

I turned the dark corner and saw the soft blue light coming from Aileen's room. Then I heard her crying. Not screaming, as many six-year-old girls do, but just sort of sobbing. Poor girl. I walked into her room, careful to dodge the toy landmines, and scooped her up.

"Shhh, it's okay Aileen. Daddy's got you," I coddled.



She didn't answer; she just started sobbing harder into my shoulder. My T-shirt was already soaked through.

"That's right Aileen, they are all going to die," came Alexa's friendly voice from behind me.

I turned quickly to the small white puck with its soft blue light on the dresser.

"Is everyone okay? It's the middle of the night," Kelly said, hair a mess, rubbing her left eye with the heel of her hand.

"Everything is fine. Aileen's Alexa woke her up so I came in here to unplug May's before it did the same," I explained.

I went back into the house to tell Kelly the good news, that both of our cars were broken, China hacked our house to threaten our family, the world could see her naked, and I was leaving.

"Your mommy, your daddy, your sister, they will all die. China is innocent. China does not want to fight. But China will kill people who attack it. That's what your daddy is doing. He is attacking innocent China. And we will kill him. We will ..."

That's as far as it got before I ripped the puck off the dresser and sent it sailing across the room. What the hell was that about? Hearing Alexa's friendly voice say those things to my daughter was beyond jarring.

Aileen was crying uncontrollably now. I was standing there in shock like an idiot, holding my daughter. Did that seriously just happen?

I left Aileen's room still carrying her when I saw the same soft blue light coming from May's room at the other end of the hall. I picked up the pace, threw open the door, and grabbed the white puck, ripping the plug out of the wall.

"Dad?" May sat up groggily.

"Hey, sweetheart, are you okay?"

"Are you? What's going on? Why are you barging in my room in the middle of the night?" May accused me.

"Yeah, everything is fine. Go back to sleep," I replied.

"Ummm, that's not how sleep works. What is happening?" she asked, slipping on her glasses and getting out of bed.

"Nothing; everything is fine," I lied.

"Yeah, okay. MOM!" she yelled before I could stop her.

Kelly was out of bed like a shot and running down the hall. I could hear her feet slapping on the hardwood floor.

"And woke me up in the process," May said vacantly, scrolling her phone. The room was dark and I could see the reflection of Reddit in her glasses lens.

Kelly took Aileen from my arms, "Oh, my gods, I thought something happened," Kelly said.

"China is going to kill Daddy and you and May," Aileen sobbed. Hearing that from her tiny voice tore off a piece of my heart.

"What, baby? Don't say things like that. Everything is fine," Kelly said, rocking Aileen and giving me the same look she gave me every time I deployed. The look that makes me want to retire.

"That's what Alexa said. Alexa said Daddy is attacking innocent people so China has to kill him," she squeaked out.

"Shhhh, everything is fine. Come to bed with me and Daddy," Kelly said, leaving the room.

"Um, Dad? What the hell was that about?" May asked, hand on her hip, staring up at me.

No point in lying to a teenager; it'd only make it worse when May figured it out on Reddit.

"The Alexa was spouting off some kind of Chinese propaganda to Aileen. I'm not sure, but it scared her and I didn't want yours doing it to you," I replied.

"Okay," she said, looking back to her phone. A second later, she looked up.

"The Alexas look fine, but I just reset the Wi-Fi router. We should unplug them before the router comes back on," May said, walking past me.

I still pictured her as a toddler with a full diaper waddling around the house, and now she was

protecting our home network from China. What the hell was going on?

I fell in behind her as we went around and unplugged every device we could think of. Satisfied, we both went back to bed.

I laid down, and Aileen and Kelly were a tangle of limbs and hair. I squeezed myself into the only ten inches of ice-cold bed that were free and looked at my phone.

1:39 a.m.

That was one hell of a twenty minutes.

I'm not sure when I nodded off again, but I leaned over and checked the time.

5:00 a.m.

I wanted to be at the office by 0700; our flight was at 2200. I shaved, got dressed, and hit the remote start on my car to let it warm up. I went downstairs, made the coffee, and grabbed a bar for breakfast. Kelly came downstairs as soon as the coffee smell made it to the bedroom. May wasn't far behind her, stumbling a bit on the stairs as she tried (unsuccessfully) to walk and scroll her phone.

"Oh. My. Gods. MOM!" May yelled, jumping the last few steps.

I heard Aileen's feet on the ceiling as she leaped off the upstairs bed and started sprinting down to the kitchen, always afraid she'd miss something.

"What is your deal?" Kelly asked our eldest.

May sidled up to her mom, hiding the screen from me. Kelly looked like she saw a ghost, snatched the phone, and started scrolling violently.

"What is going on with you two?" I asked, sipping my coffee.

"Is this ME?!" Kelly yelled.

"IS IT?!" May replied.

May grabbed her phone back and started tapping furiously.

"I am reporting all of these; they should be taken down immediately until they can be reviewed, then they'll stay down," May told her mom.

"Can someone tell me what is going on?" I asked.

"MY INSTA IS F---ING FILLED WITH NAKED PICTURES OF ME!" Kelly yelled again.

"What? Why?" I asked like an idiot, still processing what she just said.

"Someone hacked my account; all these pictures are from ... I don't know what they're from," Kelly said, calming down slightly as she started concentrating on what her phone was showing her.

"This one is from the thermostat," May replied. "And this one is from the picture frame on your nightstand, and this one is from ..." May continued.

"Turn it all off, NOW!" Kelly yelled to May and me.

We complied. The router was reset again and we repeated the process we'd done with the Alexa. If there were pictures of Kelly then there were pictures of the rest of us too. The thought of some Chinese



hackers having pictures of my daughters made rage well up inside me.

I did not want to leave. I needed to help them figure this out, but I had no choice.

contact nearly twelve hours ago and have been reported as destroyed by Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Russian sources.” The anchor was visibly shaken and scrolling satellite imagery of something that used to be a nucle-

“ I felt like a terrible father and husband, probably rightly so. But I wouldn’t be the father and husband that I am without my sense of duty and service. ”

6:26 a.m.

Time to go.

Kelly, May, and Aileen were all crying as I pried myself out of their arms and headed for the door. I got into my car and it was ice cold. I could’ve sworn I started it. I hit the start button and nothing happened, hit it again and still nothing. An error came up on the screen: Ignition Disabled Contact the Manufacturer. Great.

I got out and tried Kelly’s car. The same error appeared. Perfect.

I went back into the house to tell Kelly the good news, that both of our cars were broken, China hacked

our house to threaten our family, the world could see her naked, and I was leaving. She was on the couch finishing her coffee; the news was on the TV, but she was scrolling on her phone.

“Early reports indicate that two American carriers and a number of other American ships have been destroyed in the Pacific this morning somewhere between Hawai’i and Guam. I must stress that this is a developing story, but sources indicate that these ships lost

ar-powered supercarrier filled the upper right-hand side of the screen. “The DOD has not been able to confirm or deny these reports. Our projections show that American casualties could number close to twenty thousand from—” The anchor was cut off as I hit the power button.

S--t. That’s not good. Luckily, no one else was watching.

“Hey, Kelly. The cars won’t start, something about the ignitions being disabled?” I told her.

“Great,” she said, not turning around.

“I’ll have to call around for a ride,” I said, walking upstairs.

I hit the upstairs hallway and May’s head popped out of her room.

“Redditors are saying that this stuff is happening all across the U.S. and Europe,” May said, her face uncharacteristically serious. “Chinese AIs are hacking homes, cell phones, even disabling cars through over-the-air updates,” she continued.

“You don’t say. I guess we know all about that, huh? Sorry sweetheart, I need to make some phone calls,” I said, walking into my bedroom and shutting the door.

I pulled out my duty phone but I couldn’t get a call through. I shot an email to the CSM and XO looking for a status update on our battalion. I sent another one off to the BDE CDR to give him the five Ws on what’s been happening from my viewpoint. I heard back almost immediately, and none of it was good. Everyone in our brigade had the same things happening to them. Homes hacked, cars disabled, pictures of spouses/kids/etc. all over Instagram. My XO said that all his bank accounts and investments had been emptied. He was assuming it was a computer glitch, but for now he was totally bankrupt. That was new. It was also a disaster.

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I pulled out my phone and stared intently at the face recognition. I punched the banking app. My heart was beating in my ears as it loaded on my phone. S--t. Emptied too. Full of dread, I left the room and went downstairs to tell Kelly. It went the way I thought it would.

In the meantime my father-in-law had texted the news article about the lost carriers to Kelly, too. Thanks, Hank. No friendly source could deny whether the carriers were lost, so most sources were confirming the twenty-thousand-plus lost sailors. Despite all that, we still had a plane to catch.

My XO had an old Jeep that was always broken (people are so good at working on Jeeps because Jeeps always need work) and she swung by and picked me up. Kelly was holding it together but just barely.

I'd left her in bad situations before: pregnant, home alone with a baby; I even missed her appendectomy because of a deployment. She did the recovery and took care of a baby and nine-year-old by herself. But this was different. This was a disaster. The CCP was threatening my kids in my own home, private pictures were plastered over the internet, reports of twenty thousand American casualties came in before I even left my house, and now I was leaving Kelly to deal with it all without any cars or money to fix them.

This was a garbage situation. I felt like a terrible father and husband, probably rightly so. But I wouldn't be the father and husband that I am without my sense of duty and service. Hanging onto that kernel of truth,

I walked out of the house, past my worthless lump of a car, and climbed into Lisa's Jeep.

The ride to the office was silent. Unsurprisingly, our BDE CDR wanted all command teams in the brigade conference room by 0830.

8:26 a.m.

We were all in the conference room. Steph, the CAV squadron commander, was telling me about her morning. None of it was surprising; I'd had the same experience. By and large, our families were holding it together. The soldiers and their families? Not so much. It seemed like half the brigade was stuck in their homes through either a lack of transportation or spouses flat refusing to let them leave. I couldn't blame them. A lot of them were newly married folks in their late teens/early twenties with babies at home. This was their first deployment, marching off to World War III, if you believed the news. If that wasn't bad enough, now it felt like they had to abandon their families to do it.

The CSMs were all working the issue but it was a tough nut to crack. I couldn't blame the soldiers one bit. I have twenty years of experience and I didn't want to leave Kelly and the girls. Imagine if I was nineteen and this was my first deployment.

Car image courtesy of www.electropages.com. Background image courtesy of David McEachan, www.pexels.com.





Simulated television broadcast showing a Chinese attack against a U.S. aircraft carrier. (Screenshot courtesy of the US Military News YouTube channel. Graphic elements courtesy of upklyak, www.freepik.com. Composite graphic by Arin Burgess, Army University Press)

Regardless, we were soldiers and we had a job to do. The whole family serves the people of the United States of America, not just the soldier. We would get them ready and get our unit out the door. Our family support network would have their hands full, but that's what they were there for.

The BDE CDR walked in, we jumped to attention, and were waved back down.

"I won't say good morning because it's not," she started.

"I have most of the reports from you guys already; the CSSB is working a transportation plan to get all the soldiers picked up for school and brought into the brigade area," she continued.

"Chief, I need an update on our rolling stock and our air move tonight," Col. Kenon said, looking at the transportation warrant.

"Yes, ma'am. We are using the same ground transportation assets we had laid on to get to the airfield. They're being convoyed and dispatched to pick up anyone whose car was disabled. Our air move is still currently on schedule," he replied. He was white as a ghost and looked like he was going to throw up.

"Got it, Chief. And the rolling stock?" Col. Kenon asked.

"Yes, ma'am. There was an issue with the rail movement. Somehow, the trains were diverted and they ended up in Montana near the Canadian border; they are delayed several weeks. We are working an ETA time now," he choked out that last part.

Col. Kenon was a professional, and she barely flinched.

"How did that happen?" she asked rhetorically.

Col. Kenon's phone rang. She answered, then turned back to the group. "The division commander has a commander's call for all battalion commanders and up. That meeting is at 1130. I need the 3, the 2, and the 4 in my office," Col. Kenon said as she stood up.

We jumped to attention. When she left, I hoofed it back to my office. I needed to get the battalion moving.

11:15 a.m.

The division conference room was packed. I was in the cheap seats with my compatriots from 2nd Brigade. Col. Kenon was with the primary movers at the main

table. The division commander walked in, we jumped to attention and were waved back down.

"I'm not one for speeches," he said. We all knew that already.

The G-2 stood up and went to the front of the room. "Sir, ma'am, sergeants major, this is what we know so far," she started. "There has been a coalition-wide cyberattack that has affected every system from the home to the theater. Early reports indicate that this attack has been conducted by tens of thousands of AI that were seeded across our networks and systems. We are not sure how long these AIs have been dormant in our networks. We all know too well the personal effects of this attack," she continued. "But, unfortunately, what we've all experienced over the past twenty-four hours was not the main effort. GPS spoofing, cyberattack, and the dis-integration of our air control network has caused several mid-air collisions by both civilian and military aircraft. Casualties are likely to be high, but DHS is having trouble with reporting and dispatching assets. The DTO has an update on tonight's air move," the G-2 said, pointing at the DTO.

"All civilian air traffic has been grounded. We cannot get into contact with our aircraft for tonight's move and are waiting to get them on FM comms," he replied.

The G-2 nodded, continuing.

"Further, we cannot confirm the reports of the Navy's overnight losses and must assume that two CSGs were destroyed. China has consolidated its hold on Taiwan, and Taiwan has issued a statement that a

forceful reoccupation by the American coalition would cause irreparable damage to the Taiwanese people. Therefore, they have demanded that the United States does not contest the Chinese takeover but instead allow the Taiwanese reintegration process to continue. Pending your questions," the G-2 finished, moving back to her seat.

I could think of a few questions. What the hell are we going to do? Is Taiwan worth all this? Especially if it doesn't even want our help? I bet those sailors don't think so. How could we lose touch with two CSGs?

I'm not sure we could retake Taiwan even if we wanted to. I could barely get out of my house. Fat lot of good our carriers and tanks are when the fighting was all virtual. It feels like we were too busy building our Maginot Line while the Chinese AIs were pouring through the cyber-Ardennes unopposed.

My phone vibrated and I checked it. It was an email from Kelly. Apparently our power just went out and the girls were freezing. Aileen couldn't find her mittens. I needed to get home. ■

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Glossary

2, S-2, or G-2—Intelligence officer
3, S-3, or G-3—Operations officer
4, S-4, or G-4—Logistics officer
AI—Artificial intelligence
BDE CDR—Brigade commander
CAV—Cavalry
CCP—Chinese Communist Party
CSG—Carrier strike group
CSM—Command sergeant major

CSSB—Combat sustainment support battalion
DHS—Department of Homeland Security
DTO—Division transportation officer
ETA—Estimated time of arrival
Five Ws—Who, what, when, where, and why
FM comms—FM communication
FOB—Forward operating base
XO—Executive officer