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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

Is Russia helping China prepare for a potential invasion of Taiwan?

Russia is selling military equipment and technology to China that could help Beijing prepare an airborne invasion of Taiwan, according to an analysis of leaked Russian documents by a U.K.-based defense and security forum.

The Royal United Services Institute's analysis is based on around 800 pages of documents, including contracts and lists of equipment to be supplied by Moscow to Beijing, from the Black Moon hacktivist group, which previously published some of the documents online. It does not identify its members but describes itself in a manifesto as opposed to governments that carry out aggressive foreign policy.

The authors of the RUSI report shared some of the documents with The Associated Press and say they appear to be genuine, although parts of the documents may have been omitted or altered. AP is unable to independently verify their authenticity.

The mix of completed and apparent draft Russian documents reference meetings between Chinese and Russian delegations — including visits to Moscow — and payment and delivery timelines for high-altitude parachute systems and amphibious assault vehicles.

They suggest that Russia has begun work on the products to be delivered but don't contain direct evidence from the Chinese side that Beijing has paid any money or received any equipment.

The authors argue the equipment could be used to invade Taiwan. Under President Xi Jinping, China has embarked upon a broad modernization program of its armed forces with the goal of transforming it into a "world-class" military by 2050.

Equipment could be used to attack Taiwan

High ranking U.S. officials have suggested Xi ordered his military to be prepared for a possible invasion of Taiwan as early as 2027. Beijing claims the self-governing democracy is rightfully a part of China and has not ruled out seizing the island by force.

The documents don't mention Taiwan directly, but the analysis by the London-based institute suggests the deal would help China gain advanced parachuting capabilities that it would need to mount an invasion, potentially speeding up a timeline.

It's not certain that China has decided to invade Taiwan, but access to Russian equipment and localized training in China means Beijing will be better equipped for a potential invasion, Danylyuk said.

"The Chinese school of airborne landing is very young," he said, suggesting Moscow's assistance could help speed up China's airborne program by about 10 to 15 years.

Russia's Kremlin, and China and Taiwan's defense and foreign ministries did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

> The greatest value of the deal to China is likely in the training and procedures for command and control of parachute forces - Oleksandr Danylyuk and Jack Watling

"The greatest value of the deal" to China is likely in the training and procedures for command and control of parachute forces, because Russia has "combat experience," whereas China doesn't, write Oleksandr Danylyuk and Jack Watling.

The analysts say Russia's aim is to develop as a military supplier to China and fund its war in Ukraine. But Danylyuk also suggested that Moscow may want to draw Beijing into a conflict with Washington over Taiwan, distracting the U.S. from Russia's war with Ukraine.

While Beijing's military capabilities largely surpass Moscow's, the analysis says China has

gaps which Russia can fill. Russia has a long history of airborne forces dating back decades, knowhow the authors say China needs.

Song Zhongping, a military commentator in Beijing, said China had superior equipment, but “Russia has more combat experience."

Wen-Ti Sung, an expert on China and Taiwan with the Atlantic Council, said parachuting in forces would probably support the logistics of any invasion but would be unlikely to be the “main event.”

Instead, “China is playing the long game" by acquiring Russian equipment, Sung said. That's because Beijing will find a way to reverse engineer the equipment and technology and develop it not just for airborne combat but also for advanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance which are critical for modern warfare, he said.

Russia agreed to provide training and equipment

According to a document dated September 2024, an initial 2021 agreement detailed timelines for payments and delivery. Stages one and two — analysis of technical specifications, software modifications and equipment manufacturing — have been completed, according to that document.

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Russia also agreed to provide training in China and a complete set of equipment for an airborne battalion including the ability to carry out infiltration by special forces, the analysis says.

That includes the sale of 37 light amphibious assault vehicles, 11 amphibious anti-tank self-propelled guns, and 11 airborne armored personnel carriers, as well as command and observation vehicles. The total cost is listed as more than $210 million.

Beijing wants all the vehicles to be equipped with Chinese communication systems and to be prepared to use Chinese ammunition, the documents show.

Beijing seeks high-altitude parachute systems

Russia agreed to sell China systems which are designed for parachuting up to 190 kilograms (419 pounds) from an extremely high altitude, the RUSI analysis said.

The documents reference the minutes of a meeting from March 8, 2024 in Moscow where Russia agreed to provide China by the end of 2024 with details of how the system, known as Dalnolyot, performed under colder temperature conditions down to −60 degrees Celsius (−76 Fahrenheit.)

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According to the documents, Beijing requested testing the parachute systems for drops from 8,000 meters (26,250 feet).

That height would allow Chinese forces to glide for up to 80 kilometers (50 miles) allowing “Chinese special forces groups to penetrate the territory of other countries without being noticed,” the RUSI report said.

Danylyuk suggested the Dalnolyot system could be used for a “stage zero” landing in Taiwan, in which Beijing secretly sends in equipment and special forces from aircraft outside Taiwanese airspace.

Russia's parachute troops failed in Ukraine

Although Russia has a long history of parachute troops, Moscow did not deploy them successfully in Ukraine.

In February 2022, just days after Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, his special forces soldiers tried to take over Hostomel airfield on the outskirts of Kyiv.

Although Russia has a long history of parachute troops, Moscow did not deploy them successfully in Ukraine

They planned to establish a base to fly in more troops, but several Russian helicopters were hit by missiles before they even got to Hostomel. An attempt to take control of a military airbase south of Kyiv also failed.

Western officials and military experts suggest the failure to establish an air bridge from Russia to Ukraine turned what Moscow expected to be a swift victory into a grueling war three years and counting.

Now Moscow has dipped into its Soviet-era stocks to replace weapons on the battlefield and, like Ukraine, is ramping up its weapons production.

But that doesn't mean Moscow is unable to sell equipment to China, Danylyuk said.

The airborne equipment described in the documents was necessary only for "the invasion stage," he said. Russia doesn't need such equipment for Ukraine, he said.

Lessons from Russian defeats

The analysts wrote that China's "operational challenge" in Taiwan would be to do what Russia did not: suppress Taiwan's air defenses and land sufficient troops and equipment to be able to build up a force to defeat the Taiwanese military before it mobilizes.

The report suggests China could do that by airdropping armored vehicles on golf courses near Taiwanese ports and airfields which could allow air troops to clear a path for landing forces.