NUOVA ANTOLOGIA MILITARE
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

NAM - Strategic History issue 1

November 2026

edited by DAVIDE BORSANI



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Nuova Antologia Militare

Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare

Periodico telematico open-access annuale (www.nam-sism.org)

Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020

Scopus List of Accepted Titles October 2022 (No. 597)

Rivista scientifica ANVUR (5/9/2023) Area 11, Area 10 (21/12/2024)



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For the Journal: © Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Grafica: Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma

info@nadirmedia.it

Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl -Viale Manzoni 24/c - 00185 Roma

www.tabedizioni.it

ISSN: 2704-9795

ISBN Fascicolo 979-12-5669-553-9

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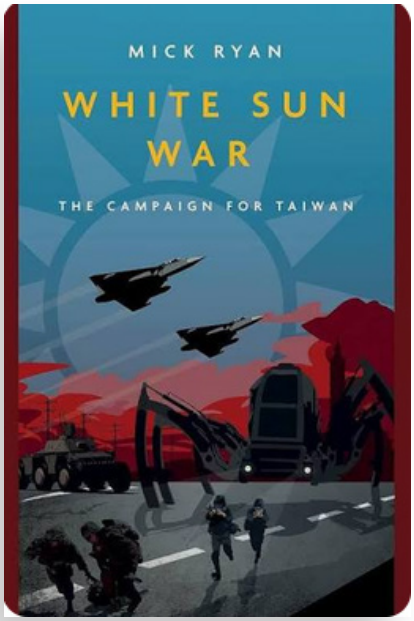
Jean-François Rosset (1703/1706-1786), Buste de Montesquieu, Collection Adolphe Thiers. Musée du Louvre, Aile Richelieu. Photo Siren-Com, 2009, CC BY SA 3.0 Unported. Wikimedia Commons.

Montesquieu's *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) represents the first instance of "philosophical history" applied to international relations—a work in which history is no longer merely a reconstruction of military and diplomatic episodes, but an interpretation of social factors and long-term historical processes. This book, which has recently been brought to the attention of scholars in the field of strategic studies by Jakub Grygiel (Orbis, 63:4, Fall 2019: 582–607) and John Stone (*Journal of Strategic Studies,* 46:6–7, 2023: 1460–1481), can also be considered the first modern example of "strategic history."

Mick Ryan,

White Sun War: *The Campaign for Taiwan*

Casemate Fiction, May 2023, ISBN 978-1636242507



The white sun in *White Sun War* is the emblem of the old Nationalist China and, today, of the Republic of China, de facto sovereign but without international recognition, on the Taiwan archipelago. The People's Republic regards it as part of China and pursues reunification by diplomatic means, as in the case of Hong Kong. The author, retired Major General Mick Ryan, who commanded the Australian Defence College from 2018 to 2022, states that he adopted the narrative model of a celebrated American historical novel, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1974: Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*, which recounts

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DOI: 10.36158/979125669553919
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the Battle of Gettysburg through the perspectives of both sides[1].

White Sun War is not, however, a historical novel (such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Frank Thiess's *Tsushima*, or Georges Duby's *The Sunday of Bouvines*, all frankly better known and more representative than *The Killer Angels*), because it does not concern an event that actually happened, whose protagonists, details, developments and outcome are known to us, but an imagined event. The book is therefore an example of war fiction, the literary genre of future war that was highly popular in Europe and America between 1871—with the celebrated The Battle of Dorking—and 1914[2], and was later absorbed into the development of science fiction, being applied more often to interstellar wars than to terrestrial ones. The genre resurfaced marginally during the Cold War and was revived in 1984 by Tom Clancy (1947–2013) with the novel later adapted into the magnificent film *The Hunt for Red October*. It is a genre more apotropaic than prophetic, since the scenarios and events it anticipates seem to have one thing in common: they never come to pass. Yet it offers little reassurance, because predictions of the costs and outcomes of imagined conflicts have invariably been infinitely more optimistic than historical reality.

Moreover, the "contemporary relevance" of *White Sun War* naturally reflects the events of the year in which it was conceived and written, namely 2022. At the time, Western observers speculated that the United States' and NATO's commitment to supporting Ukraine after Russia's invasion was leaving the Pacific front "exposed" and offering China an opportunity to seize Taiwan. Ryan dates the invasion to 2028, while his fictional characters recount its events and developments retrospectively on the tenth anniversary, in 2038. This is a potentially suicidal gamble for the book, since it projects the geostrategic context of 2022 sixteen years into the future—a context that, by May 2023, when the book was published, already appeared to be changing at dizzying speed and to have become impossible to predict with any reasonable confidence. One need only consider the rapid growth in the interdiction capabilities of drones and missiles, and their industrial and strategic implications, as well as the new form of economic warfare arising

1 Mike Ryan, "Exploring 'White Sun War'. My Forthcoming novel on a future campaign on Taiwan", *Futura Doctrina*, Mar 12, 2023.

2 Virgilio Ilari (ed.), *Future Wars. Storia della distopia militare*, Quaderno SISM 2016, Società Italiana di Storia Militare. Acies Edizioni: Milan, 2016.

from the American seizure of resources in Venezuela and Greenland, Ukraine's offensive against Russian refineries and merchant shipping, and the blockade of energy and fertiliser supplies from the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

Ryan thus imagines the "Sino-communist" invasion of Taiwan in almost exclusively military terms, as a reprise of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine: both conflicts begin on a regional, low-intensity scale, but are subject to technological and/or horizontal escalation and could therefore potentially trigger a Third World War. The book is nevertheless of considerable interest from the standpoint of military history, precisely because it offers an authoritative reflection—albeit subject to all the obvious constraints imposed by secrecy—of the Australian perspective on Taiwan's security. It also enables the attentive and well-informed reader to discern differences from American and Taiwanese perceptions.[3]

As noted above, the geostrategic picture Ryan considers in the book is that of 2022: a militarily weak and isolated China, supported only by North Korea and, fleetingly, by Russia, and surrounded by nearby adversaries—India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and South Korea—as well as by the Western QUAD. These powers constrain China's access to maritime lines of communication, seriously harming its ability to obtain the raw materials required for industrial production. Moreover, China's strategy of access denial in the China Sea is still far from being fully realised. Ryan has, however, subsequently written several assessments of the lessons learned from the Russo-Ukrainian conflict,[4] including the online essay *Translating Ukraine Lessons for the Pacific Theatre* (Australian Army Research Centre, August 2025).

Even when dated, the strategic assessments of an insider remain of considerable interest, despite being personal and filtered through security constraints. Equally interesting are the fictional characters portrayed by an Australian author,

3 See also some of Ryan's works published before 2022: 1 T*he Ryan Review* (2016). A strategic review reform document used in Australian Army education and training. 2 *Thinking About Strategic Thinking* (2021). Report on developing strategic thinking in military institutions. 3 *War Transformed: The Future of Twenty-First-Century Great Power Competition and Conflict*. February 2022 (Naval Institute Press).

4 *The War for Ukraine: Strategy and Adaptation Under Fire*. August 2024 (Naval Institute Press). *The Future of Deception in War: Lessons from Ukraine* (with Peter Singer), New America, June 2025.

especially the Taiwanese as seen through Australian eyes.

Ryan draws seven general lessons from the Russo-Ukrainian war. First is the importance of satellite surveillance of the battlefield, along with the advantages and disadvantages of private networks, particularly Elon Musk's Starlink. Second, surprise has become more difficult, while AI has reduced the frequency of close-contact operations by shortening the interval between the detection and destruction of targets. Drones have offset Ukraine's numerical inferiority along the front: drone walls create deep kill zones in which mechanised forces cannot operate and freeze land fronts, while enhancing long-range aerial penetration, albeit less effectively than stand-off air strikes. Other lessons are that stalemate at the front increases the need to train junior officers and commanders capable of making decisions; sanctions and other economic-warfare measures can also affect operational capabilities; initial strategic errors are increasingly difficult to rectify; and the home front and international support remain important.

Not all these lessons, however, can be applied to the prospect of a communist attack on Taiwan, given the maritime environment and the greater complexity of Western logistical support. Unlike Russia, China is the world's second-largest economy and can invest heavily in the research and development of advanced technologies, while security arrangements in the Indo-Pacific do not offer the same degree of operational readiness as NATO. China's manpower potential is overwhelming and virtually unlimited. Control of the First Island Chain would be sufficient to prevent Western operations in the China Sea area. Although China's nuclear arsenal cannot match those of Russia or the United States, it is supported by an extensive array of space-based sensors and anti-satellite networks that ensure a retaliatory capability. A conflict in the Pacific would encourage cooperation among Russia, China, North Korea and Iran to develop into a formal alliance, undermining the resolve of key allies, particularly South Korea and Japan.

Mario Romeo



C. Eisen invenit. *De la Fosse sculpsit.*

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M. DCC. XLVIII.

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