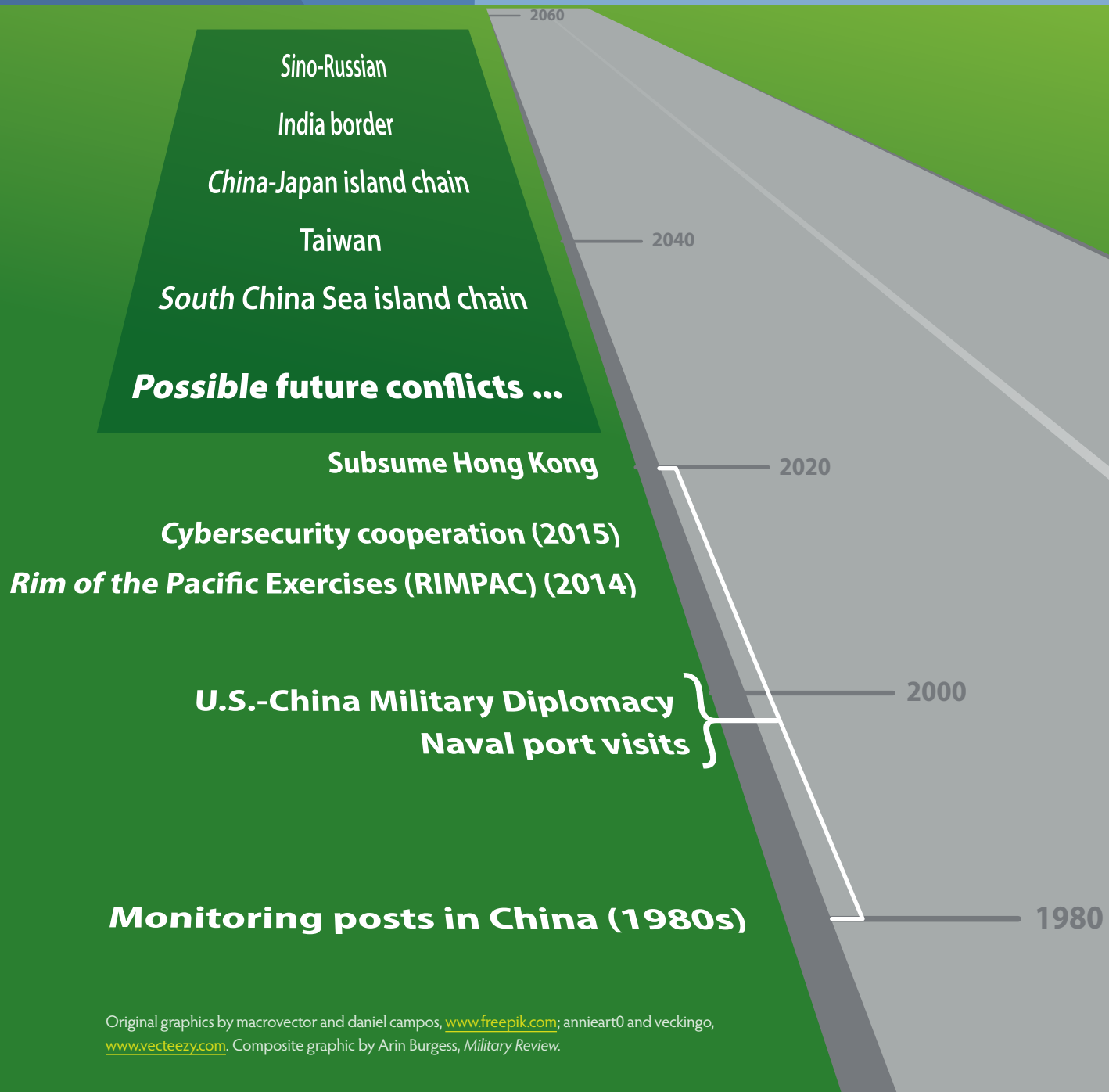


Time Horizons Drive Potential Taiwan Cross-Strait Conflict

David An





If [they] pay attention to our diplomatic protests, so much the better. If they do not, then after two or three years have passed, we shall be in a much sounder position and can attack them, if we decide to do so.

—Spartan King Archidamus regarding Athens

However, we will never allow separatists for Taiwan independence to have their way, nor allow interference by any external forces. Advancing China's reunification is a just cause, while separatist activities are doomed to failure.

—People's Republic of China Defense Minister Wei Fenghe in 2019

On 21 October 1975, during the early days of U.S.-China rapprochement, Chairman Mao Tse-tung said to then U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger that the Taiwan issue would be settled “in a hundred years ... I would not want it, because it's not wantable. There are a huge bunch of counter-revolutionaries there. A hundred years hence we will want it (gesturing with his hand), and we are going to fight for it.”¹ How do states decide whether to move forward immediately to achieve a goal—such as the People's Republic of China's (PRC) “unification” of Taiwan—or to continue to wait? Should others come to Taiwan's aid? The traditional logic is that a state will act based on its intentions, capabilities, and opportunities. Only when a state intends to reach some goal that it sets, only when it has the military capabilities to achieve the goal, and under the conditions that the right opportunities arise, would a state move forward with a plan such as initiating a cross-Taiwan Strait conflict. While these traditional factors are important, understanding the time horizons of the United States and China is equally, if not more, important in explaining why China has waited this long and whether the United States and others would come to assist Taiwan.

Time horizons have shaped the contours of the U.S.-China relationship to date to include Sino-U.S.

rapprochement in the late Cold War, bilateral cooperation in the post-Cold War era, and competition today. In the early days, China's time horizons were long since it was willing to sacrifice short-term gains for long-term growth. The United States' time horizon was short because it was uncertain how China would act once it became a major power, so the long view was not possible. Even through the early 2010s, China was still focused on long-term growth and had not tried to make any moves against Taiwan. At that time, the official U.S. foreign policy toward China was likewise pleasant and could be summarized in only three words: “positive, cooperative, and comprehensive.”²

I served for five and a half years as a U.S. diplomat responsible for the China and East Asia portfolio

during the era of the United States' positive, cooperative, comprehensive relations with China. Working out of the State Department headquarters in Washington, D.C., I helped organize the U.S.-China Strategic and

Economic Dialogue, routinely joined military-to-military talks with China such as the Pentagon's Defense Policy Coordination Talks, traveled to Beijing with senior U.S. diplomats to tour China's Peacekeeping Training Center, and even organized State Department meetings for China's “dragons”—each of the three-star generals who commanded China's then seven military regions.³ Essentially, the U.S. plan at the time was to be friendly toward China and to work together as much as possible in everything. Those were the naively blissful days of U.S.-China cooperation.

While the United States once had a short time horizon and China once had a long time horizon—back then conducive for cooperation—their time horizons are now converging and leading toward confrontation. China's military is now stronger and more confident than before, and it is now more aggressive about achieving immediate goals in the short term rather than shelving disputes in the interest of long-term growth. Island building in the South China Sea, Made in China 2025, and the Belt and Road Initiative that could contribute to building a so-called “string of pearls” to give China's military access throughout South Asia are a few prominent



examples. These examples also show how the U.S. time horizon has shifted as it has gained more information about China's behavior. The U.S. time horizon with regard to China has lengthened as China's long-term plans are becoming clearer and more certain to the United States than before.

With David Edelstein's publication of *Over the Horizon* in 2017, consideration of time horizons is at the cutting edge of international relations research, and it is a long-neglected and little-understood condition that must emerge to present China with its best opportunity to attempt a forced annexation of Taiwan, while time horizons also prompt the United States and others to increasingly resist Chinese aggression.⁴ Essentially, we are entering a new era where unification with Taiwan is no longer an issue that China is willing to forgo in the short term to make other economic gains and military development in the long term, nor is the United States willing to continue euphemistically viewing China's military rise. The United States is now more willing to challenge China and therefore increasingly likely to assist Taiwan. In other words, converging time horizons drive China to be more aggressive toward Taiwan, shortening the timeline for unification, while at the same time driving the United States to be more willing to stand up to China's aggression.⁵

Literature Review: Time Horizons, Grand Strategy, and Strategic Rivalry

A brief examination is warranted of existing theories of grand strategy and strategic rivalry as they relate to time horizons.

Time horizons. International relations scholar David Edelstein considers long- versus short-time horizons as proxies for different states—such as the United States and China—and I also adopt his use of the terms.⁶ Assigning the terms “rising power” to China and “established power” to the United States also fits the power transition literature, which would continually consider China as the less powerful state to be the rising power until a point when it surpasses the United States as the established power. To Edelstein, leaders with short-time horizons are less worried about the effects of their behavior on the long term, while conversely, leaders with long-time horizons are more aware of how their behavior affects

long-term relations.⁷ The United States and China, respectively, used to fit this pattern. In the early years, China, as a possible long-term threat of a rising power, was challenging for the established power to discern since the “long-term intentions of the rising power are characterized by true and unmeasurable uncertainty.”⁸ Uncertainty reinforces established powers' incentives to focus on the short term, since uncertainty makes it impossible to determine long-term threats and opportunities.⁹ Edelstein applies these ideas to U.S.-China relations spanning the decades from the 1970s to the early 2010s to conclude, “The short-term rewards of cooperation combine with uncertainty about the future to make cooperation not only possible but likely. Such cooperation is not naïve nor is it irrational. It is, instead, a by-product of the incentive that state leaders face to capture the short-term rewards despite the long-term risks of doing so.”¹⁰

I adopt Edelstein's point about uncertainty, and I build on it to argue that established powers have a short time horizon at the beginning phases of cooperation but gain more information about the behavior of the rising power later, so the established power later achieves a convergence of short- and long-time horizons. I also argue that rising powers do not have such uncertainty about the long-term view of how the established power would behave with immense power in the future because they can already observe how the established power is acting as it already has immense power. I, therefore, contribute to the international relations theory literature by arguing that while established powers only have a short-term view in the beginning of cooperation with a rising power, a rising power is focused on the

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long-term view at the beginning of cooperation. Over time, the established power starts to gain a long-term view, and the rising power asserts short-term interests as both sides move toward what I call a convergence of time horizons—both states incorporating short and long time horizons in assessing one another—with an effect to accelerate history for China’s ambitions toward

are even less sure when it comes to estimating their peers’ future intentions.”¹⁶ John Mearsheimer argues that states determine which other states threaten their security by focusing “on the offensive capabilities of potential rivals, not their intentions,” since “intentions are ultimately unknowable.”¹⁷ With this in mind, time horizons couple with capabilities and possibly

“Unification with Taiwan is no longer an issue that China is willing to forgo in the short term to make other economic gains and military development in the long term.”

Taiwan and also spur the United States and others to resist China by helping Taiwan (see table, page 15).

Grand strategy. Such foreign policy shifts are no less than shifts in states’ grand strategies, which take into account other states’ intentions and capabilities. According to Daniel Drezner, Ronald Krebs, and Randall Schweller, “Grand strategy is a roadmap for how to match means with ends.”¹¹ A grand strategic approach holds that careful planning at the center produces the best results and that being too flexible is better than being too rigid, as grand strategy is typically the purview of theater commanders, special envoys, and subject-matter experts.¹² Through the course of such careful planning, some scholars believe that it is important to pay attention to how states signal their intentions to one another. Andrew Kydd argues that costly signals—which are costly changes in the aggregation of capabilities and types of forces that a country employs—can communicate benign intentions.¹³

Yet, other scholars find that it is more important to focus on a state’s offensive military capabilities than to try to discern intentions. A rising power like China can send mixed signals and thereby quietly rise without provoking a negative response. Oriana Skylar Mastro describes China as a “stealth superpower.”¹⁴ After all, Deng Xiaoping famously said, “Hide your strength, bide your time, never take the lead.”¹⁵ Sebastian Rosato argues that intentions of great powers are inscrutable—that “great powers cannot confidently assess the current intentions of others based on their domestic characteristics or behavior, and they

intentions to alter U.S. and Chinese grand strategies toward one another. To counterargue that China is behaving more boldly because it is now powerful is precisely my point: China’s military and economic capabilities have vastly improved, and this also corresponds to the shift in China’s time horizon.

Strategic rivalry. One of the more contentious discussions in academia is whether the United States and China are currently rivals and when exactly they have been rivals throughout recent history. *Military Review* has recently featured heated debates about whether the United States and China are in conflict or competition.¹⁸ For scholars, identifying which exact states can be considered strategic rivals and whether the United States and China are strategic rivals is important because a small number of strategic rival dyads engage in a disproportionately large percentage of wars. Strategic rivals have fought in 77.3 percent of all interstate wars since 1816, 87.2 percent of all interstate wars in the twentieth century, and 91.3 percent of all interstate wars in the post-1945 era.¹⁹

In academic terms, Paul Diehl and Gary Goertz formulate a list of enduring rivalries and record that the United States and the People’s Republic of China were rivals up until 1972 but not after.²⁰ William Thompson calls the U.S.-China pair “consensus rivals” since there is a high level of agreement between Thompson’s strategic rivalry, Goertz’s enduring rivalries, and Bennett’s interstate rivalry data sets that there is or was once a strategic rivalry between these states.²¹ In policy terms, as of 2017, the White House has officially stated that “great power

competition returned. China and Russia began to reassert their influence regionally and globally.”²²

Implications for Cross-Strait Conflict

Convergence of time horizons accelerates China’s plans for Taiwan. In reference to Deng’s famous “hide and bide” quote, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd held a question-and-answer session for Bloomberg titled “Emperor Xi’s China Is Done Biding Its Time.”²³ In terms of military capabilities, China’s military has successfully modernized over the recent decades culminating in the recent and complete reorganization of China’s seven military regions into five new theater commands. In terms of intentions, in the opening quote of my article, I show that Mao made it clear four and a half decades ago that China would settle the Taiwan issue at some point. I also quoted the current Chinese defense minister’s 2019 statement that China “will never allow separatists for Taiwan independence to have their way ...

Advancing China’s reunification is a just cause.”²⁴ As time horizons, capabilities and intentions align with a PRC decision to take

Table. Time Horizons Based on Power and Phases of the Relationship

		Phases	
		Early (1970s to 2000s)	Late (especially late 2010s)
Power dynamics	United States as established power	Short-time horizon	Converged short-long horizon
	China as rising power	Long-time horizon	Converged long-short horizon

(Table by author)



“China’s goal is in a time of crisis is to deny the U.S. access to the area within the ‘first island chain’ (the South China Sea bounded by a line running from the bottom of Japan, encompassing Taiwan, and passing to the west of the Philippines). But it also seeks to restrict access to the outer ‘second island chain’ with weapons that can reach as far as the U.S. bases on Guam. This overall strategy can be bolstered by Chinese land-based aircraft and missiles.” (Excerpt and map from Jonathan Marcus, “Is the U.S. Still Asia’s Only Military Superpower?,” BBC, 25 August 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49423590>)

military action against Taiwan, and then it becomes simply a matter of opportunity.





Considering likely Chinese invasion scenarios, Taiwan Ministry of National Defense's (MND) most recent *2019 National Defense Report* names China as the sole military threat against Taiwan, and the report outlines China's three elements for initiating a cross-strait conflict. First, Taiwan's MND anticipates China would implement blockade operations, since China has continually conducted joint sea control operational exercises and deployed various antiship missiles.²⁵ Second, Taiwan's MND expects China to conduct firepower strikes to shock, awe, and paralyze Taiwan since China's multiple launch rocket systems can cover the entirety of Taiwan and Taiwan's offshore islands.²⁶ Third, Taiwan's MND expects China to undergo a joint amphibious landing as the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) continues to conduct joint landing drills with amphibious assault vehicles and landing platform docks.²⁷ To carry out these three goals, China is improving reconnaissance by deploying reconnaissance satellites and over-the-horizon radars; preparing cyber, electronic warfare, and disinformation tools; improving command and control of joint military operations; and deploying China's Dong Feng antiship

President Gerald Ford (center) and daughter Susan watch as Secretary of State Henry Kissinger shakes hands with Chairman of Chinese Communist Party Mao Tse-tung 2 December 1975 during a visit to the chairman's residence. (Photo courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Library)

missiles to deny involvement of foreign forces.²⁸ Taiwan has adjusted its military throughout past decades to deal with each of these anticipated threats.²⁹

Ian Easton, author of *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, paints a more complete picture by hypothesizing that China would make the following sequence of moves against Taiwan:

- ◆ China would create a war plan to topple Taiwan's government.
- ◆ The PLA would conduct drills simulating surprise amphibious assaults.
- ◆ The PLA would mobilize Chinese military units along the coastline of Fujian Province.
- ◆ Chinese Communist Party leadership would announce live-fire military drills along the Taiwan Strait.

- China would close international shipping lanes along the strait for safety during drills.
- Beijing state-run media would downplay drills as posturing to alleviate concerns.
- Chinese troops would clandestinely board civilian ferries and roll-on/roll-off ships that routinely pass through the Taiwan Strait.
- Ships would move toward Taiwan on the day of the exercise and only tip hand at the last moment.
- Ostensibly civilian ships would offload mechanized infantry and tanks onto Taiwan.
- The PLA would crush local resistance and deliver follow-on reinforcement.
- The PLA would continue to execute cyberattacks, missile strikes, targeted assassinations, submarine ambushes, and heavy bombing to keep Taiwan's government paralyzed.³⁰

The Way Forward

The key implications of U.S. and Chinese converging time horizons is that China is now less willing to wait on a goal it can achieve in the short term, such as invading Taiwan; and the United States and others are more willing to confront a rising China, such as in defense of Taiwan.

In this shifting time horizon context, the U.S. military should be trained, equipped, and prepared to execute any option selected by U.S. civilian and military decision-makers regarding providing assistance to Taiwan.

China would focus on at least two top priorities to accomplish annexation of Taiwan without letting the situation expand into a larger conflict, and the goal for other militaries would be to quickly and effectively counter these plans if they chose to intervene on Taiwan's behalf. One top priority to avoid expanding the conflict is for China to take swift action, leading

to a *fait accompli*. Quickly establishing a sense of *fait accompli* would make the people of Taiwan and others in the world feel a sense of hopelessness to change the Chinese invasion situation. Easton explains this how China could “flash invade” Taiwan.³¹ China is indeed capable of fighting a speedy war, but there are few contemporary data points to draw from so we must reach farther back in history. The last war that China fought, against Vietnam in 1979, lasted a total of only twenty-seven days and is a testament to China's speed-

iness.³² During the Chinese Civil War in the 1940s, Mao wanted to act fast against the nationalists before the United States could decide to become involved.³³ The communist forces speedily took over the major port cities—Shanghai, Qingdao, and others—as a top priority to prevent the United States from establishing a foothold in China and assisting Mao's rival Chiang Kai-shek.³⁴ It would make the most sense that China would also attempt to take quick action in a Taiwan invasion scenario since China still holds similar fears of U.S. involvement. A caveat is that these examples are from many decades ago, and Mao is no longer with us today as China's paramount strategist. Yet, data points about war-

fare during China's contemporary history are sparse, without reaching back to pre-World War II Republican or dynastic eras. Another caveat is that just because China's attack is quick does not make it necessarily successful. China could attack quickly and lose quickly if Taiwan mounts a successful defense, even without foreign intervention.³⁵

If China somehow manages to successfully invade Taiwan and meets local resistance, China's other top priority to prevent the situation from expanding into a larger conflict is to convince the global audience that



China's minister of national defense Gen. Wei Fenghe at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defense Ministers' Meeting 18 October 2018 in Singapore. (Photo by Lisa Ferdinando, Department of Defense)



the people of Taiwan prefer Chinese rule rather than its past democracy. This narrative has been in existence since the 1940s when China used exhortations that it will “liberate” Taiwan, as if liberation by China is always an improvement on Taiwan’s circumstances. China would apply to Taiwan the same playbook that China uses in Tibet and Xinjiang. News articles from China attempt to spin its Uyghur forced-internment camps as if they were education classrooms by officially calling them “vocational education and training centers” where people can freely come and go.³⁶ Information coming out of China about Tibet and Xinjiang focuses on how the Chinese Han majority has helped those regions with economic development and how they are now wealthier and better off than before.³⁷ Applied to Taiwan, China would likewise try to convince the world that Taiwan is better off under China’s rule than what it would claim was Taiwan’s prior tumultuous democracy. U.S. decision-makers and others in the world should be wary of such claims of harmonious relations between the people of China and Taiwan if and when the time comes. Of course, there are countless other priorities, but these two are most relevant to the question of how China might accomplish annexation without letting the situation expand into a larger conflict.

According to the current, ambiguous U.S. policy regarding defending Taiwan, the United States would come to a decision about whether or not to assist Taiwan only when a possible invasion approaches.³⁸ The U.S. government is purposefully ambiguous about making such a decision until a point in time approaching conflict to deter China’s adventurism toward Taiwan and also to constrain Taiwan from making provocative moves toward *de jure* independence.

When the time comes to decide, the rationalist cost-benefit analysis case for U.S. intervention to assist Taiwan is built on reasoning such as

- security—Taiwan has been a loyal partner to the United States and was even previously a U.S. mutual defense treaty ally up until 1979;
- economics—Taiwan usually ranks as the tenth largest trading partner of the United States;
- regime type—Taiwan is a liberal constitutional democracy with free and fair elections like the United States; and
- audience cost concerns—Japan, South Korea, and Australia will be more skeptical of U.S.

commitment to them if the United States backs away from Taiwan (though Taiwan is no longer technically a treaty ally like the rest).

On the other hand, the United States may decide not to intervene because it does not want to sacrifice its troops in another foreign conflict, it may want to avoid a direct kinetic conflict with nuclear-armed China that could escalate to frightening levels, or other so-called unit-level characteristics like the personal views of the U.S. leaders toward China and Taiwan at the time.

Aside from the United States, others that could intervene to assist Taiwan would most likely include Japan, South Korea, Australia, and possibly the other NATO allies of the United States. Russia and North Korea might step in to help China. These proxy configurations would start to resemble the Korean War and Vietnam War from the Cold War era and geopolitics would return “back to the future,” as John Mearsheimer predicted.³⁹ China has long accused the United States of maintaining a “Cold War mentality,” so it would be ironic if it was China’s own actions of invading Taiwan that brought the world back to the Cold War.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Almost five decades ago, Mao claimed that China would be willing to wait a hundred years to settle the Taiwan question. Three decades ago, Deng cautioned his Chinese people to “hide your strength, bide your time.” In those times, China’s time horizon was long, and it was willing to hold off on short-term interests for long-term growth. The United States was similarly gracious toward China. To take a time horizon approach toward cross-strait relations today is to recognize that China is now more interested in achieving immediate goals—such as what it calls Taiwan “reunification”—than taking its previous approach of holding off for the sake of long-term priorities such as economic growth and military modernization. For the United States, a time horizon approach means viewing China with less uncertainty than in the past. This also means the United States should be even more ready to deal with China’s challenges, particularly regarding Taiwan. The U.S. military must be prepared to deal with any contingency.

One decade ago, I brought China’s “dragons”—the seven heads of China’s seven military regions—into the U.S. State Department headquarters. The feeling of leading seven Chinese three-star generals through the

State Department was an unforgettable moment for me as a U.S. diplomat. By instinct and training, the dragons fell into an orderly line right behind me, perfectly spaced two feet apart from one another as they walked in one long formation with me at the head of the line. As I led them through the building and up to the deputy secretary of state's conference room, the eyes of other international diplomats gathered in the U.S. State Department foyer were on me and the Chinese generals with Chinese flags stitched on the sleeves of their uniforms and multiple stars on their shoulders. The meeting between senior U.S. and Chinese officials was one that I organized, for which I wrote the talking points, and during which I spoke up to help answer tough and nuanced "if raised" foreign policy questions from the group of Chinese generals.

I look back fondly on those years of close U.S.-China cooperation as part of myself wishes we could return to those pleasant days. Yet, trend lines and time horizons are moving in the opposite direction. Time horizons are now converging such that China will no longer forego short-term interests for long-term gains, and the United States can no longer afford to have any idealistic illusions about China's intentions and capabilities—particularly vis-à-vis Taiwan. ■

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