

The Question

Why Would China Not Invade Taiwan Now?

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One of many pieces of nationalist propagandistic artwork created by students of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, China, that depict a People's Liberation Army invasion of Taiwan. (Image courtesy of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute)

The political arguments for an invasion of Taiwan by China have grown considerably stronger in recent weeks. The main constraint now is military. The key question is whether the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is capable of achieving a quick victory over Taiwan.

Western experts were confident that the Soviets would not go into Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979, the Iraqis into Kuwait in 1990, and the Russians into Crimea in 2014. Even the Israelis misread the signals at the start of the Yom Kippur war in 1973. This is not an area where the West has a good record.

A key question now is whether China might risk an invasion of Taiwan. Some analysts have seized on recent clues. Chinese Prime Minister Premier Li Keqiang dropped the word "peaceful" before "reunification" when discussing Taiwan in his annual work report published in May. And President Xi Jinping, speaking to the PLA on 26 May, suggested they should "comprehensively strengthen the training of troops and prepare for war."

This article does not argue that China will invade Taiwan. There are good reasons for the Chinese not doing so. It would be a huge gamble for armed forces which have not been employed in combat during the

careers of even their most senior officers. The aircraft carriers and amphibious landing ships are still relatively new. A lot could go wrong. A very public military failure would be a humiliating and possibly career-threatening experience for President Xi Jinping and for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Many members of the leadership would doubtless argue for patience.

What this article *does* try to convey are the arguments in favor of acting now rather than waiting. There is likely

to be at least one member of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) and the Central Military Commission (CMC) who would make some or all of the following ten points.

- There may never be another moment when the whole world is focused on managing an event of the scale of the coronavirus pandemic. There is not the bandwidth in any Western capital to react to another global crisis. Furthermore, China itself is over the worst of its own domestic COVID-19 outbreak.
- There has always been an intention, voiced in different ways over the years, to unify the country in time for the centenary of the CCP in 2021 and long before that of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2049.
- The idea of "one country, two systems" appears to have failed in Hong Kong. The new Chinese clamp-down in Hong Kong will kill forever any notion that Taiwan can be lured into a similar arrangement.
- The victory of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in the January 2020 elections has shown that the nationalist spirit is still alive and well in Taiwan. With a four-year term there is no guarantee that a pro-Beijing party will win in 2024, especially after the coming repression of Hong Kong. Nor does the new DPP administration respect the "1992 Consensus," by which a former Kuomintang (KMT) government tacitly accepted that China and Taiwan were a single nation.
- The Trump administration has no appetite for overseas military adventures, and certainly not before the November U.S. presidential election. Trump is not going to war with China, and not over Taiwan. He is far more interested in trade wars and economic advantage.
- The Americans have always been ambivalent about the exact nature of their defense commitments to Taiwan. The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act fell far short of a guarantee to come to Taiwan's assistance in the event of a Chinese invasion. Even President Reagan's "Six Assurances" of 1982 made no mention of U.S. military intervention.
- There is little chance that the U.S. would sail a carrier strike group into or near the Taiwan Strait now that the PLA Navy (PLAN) is equipped with quiet submarines. The loss of a U.S. surface ship could lead to a full-scale war which neither China nor the U.S. would wish under any circumstances.

Tim Willasey-Wilsey

served for over twenty-seven years in the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. His first overseas posting was to Angola during the Cold War followed by Central America during the instability of the late 1980s. Much of his career was spent in Asia including a posting to Pakistan in the mid-1990s. Tim has focused for many years on South Asia and North East Asia as well as the issues of terrorism, organized crime, insurgency, and conflict resolution. He has twice been elected to the Council of Chatham House, UK's premier global think-tank.

- Russia's President Vladimir Putin showed how it should be done when, in 2014, he annexed the Crimean Peninsula. The secret is to achieve victory quickly and then accept the inevitable diplomatic condemnation and imposition of sanctions. But the international community has a short memory. There is even talk now of readmitting Russia to the G7.
- The PLA needs to be used if China is to be recognized as a genuine world power. The Americans have had the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan to demonstrate their military prowess and become proficient with their equipment in action, but the Chinese military have been confined to barracks for too long.
- China could hardly be more globally unpopular than now. Much of it may be unfair but there will be plenty of time to improve diplomatic relations once Taiwan has been safely reunified. And, once reunified, pro-Western countries, like Japan and South Korea, will be more humbled and less likely to believe in the U.S. defense umbrella.

With such a forceful political case made for an invasion, the focus would then turn to the PLA members on the CMC. When asked if they could quickly conquer Taiwan, it would be fascinating to hear their answer.

The Conversation

Editor's note: This column has been modified from its original version. The original document with all guest notes can be found at <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/the-question-why-would-china-not-invade-taiwan-now>.

I find Mr. Willasey-Wilsey's proposition plausible. Though the Chinese are quintessentially patient, they are also demonstrably opportunistic. I would be surprised if this debate hasn't already begun within the CMC. In the end, I think they will conclude that there are more reasons for them to remain patient on the Taiwan issue. But I hope we have our antennas up.

—Gen. Martin Dempsey (Ret.), Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

There is a cogent argument to be made at the most senior levels in Beijing that this is a perfect moment for a strike on Taiwan. But I would ascribe less than a one in four chance that they make a military move in the immediate future, i.e., before U.S. elections. The risks militarily are far from negligible. The Taiwanese will fight and fight hard. As Sun Tzu says, despite all his elegant tactical and strategic maneuvering,

“when on death ground, fight.” Madame Tsai, the current president and her national security team will see this correctly as a death ground and they will fight. Second, China has much more to lose internationally from economic sanctions than any other major economy. Coming on top of the COVID fiasco, there will be plenty of international support to really hurt its economy. Finally, I think it is valid to say the U.S. won't want to get into a war over Taiwan; but there are many military options in cyber, South China Sea strikes, special forces, and other means to indicate displeasure in the event of such a move. All of this is a somewhat close call, and from a Chinese perspective there are indeed reasons to “fight tonight” for Taiwan—but my assessment is the Chinese will crack down on Hong Kong, build their fleet, economy, and cyber for another decade, and make their move then against Taiwan—not now. They will play the long game.

—Adm. James Stavridis (Ret.), Former Supreme Allied Commander, NATO

This is an interesting hypothesis. There probably are some hawks in Beijing arguing for the invasion of Taiwan, confident the U.S. would not respond with military might. They would be wrong. Failure to defend Taiwan is not an option. The Taiwan Relations Act of January 1, 1979, mandated by the Congress, is explicit: “... any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means ... (is) a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the U.S. ... To maintain the capacity of the U.S. to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social and economic system, of the people of Taiwan.” The President and Congress, with the vast support of the American people, would respond quickly and decisively to an invasion of Taiwan. This is a moral and geostrategic imperative for the U.S. Moreover, an invasion of Taiwan would be a military and economic disaster for China. Taiwan is not Crimea. Militarily, Taiwan has capabilities that, coupled with U.S. support, would repel an invasion, inflicting significant damage on China. Economically, China is experiencing high unemployment, estimated at from 15 to 20 percent of the population, with export orders falling to rates similar to the 2009 global financial crisis. An invasion of Taiwan would devastate its faltering economy, with global opprobrium ending its ambitious Belt and Road and other related initiatives. In short, an invasion of Taiwan would be a catastrophic miscalculation on the part of China.

—Amb. Joseph DeTrani, Former Special Advisor to the DNI and former CIA Director of East Asia Operations

