

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Beijing Is Still Playing the Long Game on Taiwan

Why China Isn't Poised to Invade

By Andrew J. Nathan

Concern is growing in Taiwan, in the United States, and among U.S. allies in Asia that China is preparing to attack Taiwan in the near future. Testifying before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee last year, Admiral Philip Davidson, then the commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, warned that Beijing might attempt to seize the island in the next six years. Unifying Taiwan with mainland China is a key element of Chinese President Xi Jinping's "Chinese dream." And as the political scientist Oriana Skylar Mastro has [argued](#) in these pages, Xi wants "unification with Taiwan to be part of his personal legacy," suggesting that an armed invasion could come before the end of his third term as secretary-general of the Chinese Communist Party in 2027 and almost certainly before the end of his probable fourth term in 2032.

Putin's war in Ukraine has intensified these concerns. Xi's announcement just before the Russian invasion of a "no limits" partnership with Moscow, coupled with his failure to condemn Putin's actions and the Chinese media's endorsement of Russian propaganda, seem to signal Beijing's support for Russia's territorial aggression. Beijing may see a strategic opening now that U.S. political and military resources are tied up in Europe. Moreover, Chinese leaders may have interpreted the West's response to the Russian attack as an indication that the United States will not intervene militarily to defend a country to which it is not bound by a defense treaty, especially against a nuclear-armed adversary. As David Sacks of the Council on Foreign Relations has argued, "Chinese policymakers may conclude that Russia's nuclear arsenal effectively deterred the United States, which would be unwilling to go to war with a nuclear power over Taiwan."

But fears of an imminent Chinese attack are misplaced. For decades, China's policy toward Taiwan has been characterized by strategic patience, as has its approach to other territorial claims and disputes—from India to the South China Sea. Far from spurring China to jettison this approach in favor of an imminent military assault on Taiwan, the war in Ukraine will reinforce Beijing's commitment to playing the long game. The price Moscow has paid, both militarily and in the form of international isolation, is but a fraction of what China could expect if it were to attempt to take Taiwan by force. Better to wait patiently for Taiwan's eventual surrender, as Beijing sees it, than to strike now and risk winning the island at too high a cost—or losing it forever.

IMPENDING ATTACK?

Fear that China will attack Taiwan had been growing well before Putin invaded Ukraine. As Robert Blackwill and Philip Zelikow observed in a 2021 report published by the Council on Foreign Relations, Taiwan is "becoming the most dangerous flash point in the world for a possible war that would involve the United States of America, China, and probably other major powers." In addition to its historical and economic motives for controlling Taiwan, Beijing feels the need to prevent other powers from using the island as a base to pressure China militarily or

subvert it politically. For its part, the United States has strong motives for insisting on what Washington has referred to since 1972 as the “peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue”—which, given the anti-unification sentiments of the Taiwanese people, means an open-ended and perhaps permanent state of de facto autonomy for the island. Although there is much emotion on both sides—for China, nationalism; for the United States, commitment to democracy—what makes the Taiwan issue truly nonnegotiable are the two countries’ security interests.

In 1979, when the United States broke diplomatic relations with Taiwan to normalize relations with China, Beijing had a reasonable chance of winning over Taiwan without using force. Taiwan was diplomatically isolated, militarily weak, and increasingly economically dependent on the mainland. China encouraged this dependence by establishing a host of incentives for Taiwanese enterprises to do business on the mainland, by purchasing Taiwanese exports, and by sending Chinese tourists to the island. Beijing also invested in Taiwanese media with the aim of generating favorable news coverage and held exchanges with leaders of the anti-independence Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party.

But these efforts proved insufficient to stem the tide against unification in Taiwanese public opinion and politics. According to opinion polls, the share of Taiwanese voters favoring unification fell from 28 percent in 1999 to less than two percent in 2022. An overwhelming majority favor “maintaining the status quo,” which in the language of Taiwanese politics means sustaining autonomy without formally declaring independence. Since 2016, the anti-unification Democratic Progressive Party has controlled both the presidency and the legislature, and it looks well positioned to win the next set of national elections in 2024.

These trends have prompted China to adopt a more threatening posture toward Taiwan. Beijing has stepped up measures to isolate the island diplomatically, slowed imports and the tourist trade, trained the Chinese military to conduct the complicated joint operations necessary for a cross-strait invasion, and conducted frequent probes of Taiwan’s air defense identification zone. China has also developed what the Pentagon calls “anti-access/area denial” capabilities—including long-range precision missiles, submarine-launched torpedoes, antiship ballistic missiles, cybertools, and space capabilities—designed to hold at bay a U.S. defense of Taiwan.

These moves have fed speculation that China is building up to a full-scale attack. In addition to Xi’s desire to secure his legacy, the shifting balance of power between China and the United States is often cited by U.S. analysts as a possible motivation for Xi. The scholars Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, for instance, have suggested that China may attack in the near term because it has reached the peak of its national strength—and China’s leaders know it. China is looking at a period of decline caused by a combination of unsustainable debt, rising labor costs, an aging population, declining productivity, and a critical water shortage. Meanwhile, the United States and Taiwan have recently started to readjust their military postures to counter the asymmetric threat China poses. The Biden administration is pulling Japan and South Korea together around a commitment to “stability in the Taiwan Strait,” and Western businesses are gradually moving their production sites out of China because of rising labor costs, lack of a level playing field in the Chinese market, and COVID-19 restrictions. As this reorientation gathers steam, the West’s economic incentives to avoid war with China will diminish. By this logic, Beijing has reason to strike before its adversaries are ready.

WAITING GAME

The facts on which such forecasts are based are not wrong, but they are incomplete. A fuller set of facts suggests that China is still pursuing a strategy of strategic patience when it comes to Taiwan. First, Chinese leaders—rightly or wrongly—seem confident that they can handle their own problems better than the West can handle its problems. They don't deny the challenges that Beckley and Brands highlight, but they believe the West is in decline, hobbled by ill-managed and slow-growing economies, social divisions, and weak political leaders. However, Chinese strategists do not seem to believe that China has yet reached a favorable power balance with the West. As Yan Xuetong, dean of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University, has argued, "China's global reach still has its limits. Despite being a major power, China also thinks of itself as a developing country—and rightly so, considering that its GDP per capita remains far behind those of advanced economies."

Beijing can afford to wait for power in the Western Pacific to tip decisively in its favor. When Washington comes to understand that the cost of defending Taiwan is beyond its means, and Taiwanese officials realize that Washington no longer has the appetite for a clash with China, Taiwan will pragmatically negotiate an arrangement that Beijing can accept. In the meantime, China needs only to deter Taipei and Washington from attempting to lock in formal Taiwanese independence. Beijing's shows of force are not precursors of an imminent attack, therefore, but measures intended to buy time for history to take its course.

Second, contrary to the common portrayal of China as itching for war, Beijing has demonstrated strategic patience in pursuit of its other goals. A good example is Beijing's behavior in the South China Sea, where China has built and militarized seven sand islands without triggering a war with the United States or rival territorial claimants. It did so by building only on landforms it already controlled, claiming all along that it wasn't doing what it was doing. The rival territorial claimants were too weak to confront China, while the United States lacked a justification for doing so because it has no territorial claims where China was building. Beijing restricted access to but refrained from seizing a landform it contests with the sole U.S. treaty ally involved in these disputes—the Philippines—which in any case lacked an appetite to invoke its alliance with Washington by moving militarily to defend itself.

China likewise changed the strategic status quo without triggering an armed conflict over the contested Senkaku Islands, known in China as the Diaoyu Islands, by escalating from an occasional maritime presence in Japanese waters to a permanent one, supplementing its naval forces with less confrontational coast guard, maritime militia, and fishing vessels. Beijing followed a similar playbook in the contested Ladakh region of India, where Chinese troops gradually advanced their positions and established a series of new lines of control with only one confirmed outbreak of shooting that was quickly contained.

China has invested in ostensibly civilian port projects across the Indian Ocean and beyond that could serve as foundations for future naval operations, raising some alarm but no counteraction. Beijing has also used its economic and diplomatic influence in Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Oceania and its norm-setting power in international institutions to incentivize governments to align with China's interests, again generating some alarm but no effective resistance. Such diplomatic, economic, and military "gray zone tactics" illustrate that China's strategic behavior is geared toward the long term rather than the short term, moving from no presence to sustained presence in a host of arenas without generating substantial pushback, much less armed conflict (with the exception of the fighting in Ladakh). That same strategic caution has so far been evident in China's policy toward Taiwan, where

Beijing has dialed up tension and deterred a Taiwanese drive for independence without precipitating a crisis.

Finally, the lesson Xi is likely drawing from Putin’s war in Ukraine is not that territorial aggression would go unpunished militarily by the West but that it would be both difficult and costly. There is no reason to believe that Xi is surrounded, as [Putin](#) seems to be, by yes men who will tell him that a war over Taiwan can be easily won. Even if he is, however, the grinding conflict in Ukraine is reminding him that war is unpredictable and rule over a resisting population is costly. The amphibious operation China would need to undertake to seize Taiwan would be far more difficult than the land invasion Russia has carried out in Ukraine. Xi has been reforming the Chinese military’s command structure and ramping up training for such an operation, but Chinese forces remain untested in actual combat operations. Meanwhile, the chances that the United States would intervene to defend Taiwan have increased as anti-Chinese sentiment has risen in the United States and Europe—and after U.S. President Joe Biden remarked last month that defending Taiwan is “the commitment we made.”

Even if Beijing could win a war over Taiwan, it is unclear that it could win what would come next. As painful as Russia’s isolation from Western economies has been for Moscow, the postwar scenario for the Chinese economy would be even more damaging. China imports 70 percent of its oil and 31 percent of its natural gas; it is the world’s largest coal producer but still needs to import more. Although it is striving for food self-sufficiency, China is the world’s largest importer of food, especially corn, meat, seafood, and soybeans. Some of these energy and food imports come from Russia, but many come from countries that would sanction China if it invaded Taiwan. And even if they did not, China’s navy doesn’t have the global reach to defend the shipping routes across which these and many other vital commodities flow. Any war over Taiwan, even a successful one for Beijing, would deal a devastating blow to the Chinese economy, creating conditions that would threaten domestic political stability and usher in the failure, not the realization, of the Chinese dream.

FIGHTING PATIENCE WITH PATIENCE

None of this is reason for American or Taiwanese complacency. China is following the dictum of the ancient strategist Sun-tzu: “To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.” If Beijing eventually succeeds in taking Taiwan, it will fatally undermine Washington’s credibility with its Asian—and even its European—allies, challenging Australia, Japan, South Korea, and other countries to either come to terms with China or prepare to defend themselves without American help.

The only way to defeat China’s Taiwan strategy of strategic patience is to exercise corresponding patience, continually adapting American and Taiwanese deterrence as Chinese arms and training present an ever-changing and ever-growing threat. This is a tall order for the United States at a time when its share of global GDP has declined to less than 25 percent (from 40 percent in 1960) and the U.S. Navy complains that it doesn’t have enough ships to perform all the missions it is charged with. It is an even taller order for an island that spends only 2.1 percent of its GDP on defense and that has only recently begun to move away from an unrealistic reliance on expensive advanced platforms to stave off a Chinese attack and toward a more realistic “porcupine strategy” involving mines, short-range missiles, civil defense, and guerrilla resistance. But if a prolonged standoff in the Taiwan Strait is the most likely prospect for the future, the side that stays in the game the longest is the one that is likely to come out on top.

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