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War with China?

By Loro Horta

SYNOPSIS

The admiral in charge of the US Indo-Pacific Command recently told Congress that China could invade Taiwan in the next six years. However, there is little evidence that China has the intention or even the capabilities to attack Taiwan. Exaggerating the likelihood of war could lead to bad policy planning and a self-fulfilling prophecy.

COMMENTARY

THE HEAD of the US Indo Pacific Command, Admiral Philip Davidson, rightly pointed out recently that China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), is fast modernising and expanding its capabilities. He predicted that China would attack Taiwan in the next six years.

Is China really getting ready to invade Taiwan, a move that could start a war with the United States? Why in the [next six years](#)? The reasons given for this timeframe range from growing Chinese incursions into Taiwan's air space and territorial waters to more doubtful ones like the PLA wanting to mark its 100th anniversary by reunifying Taiwan with the mainland.

The Military Balance

The PLA and the Chinese leadership do not make decisions rashly; they are rational and calculating. Chinese leaders have a healthy dose of respect for US power and know that China is still inferior to the US in many sectors of the military.

The US navy is the most technologically advanced force in the world and the most experienced. While China has been adding modern warships and submarines to its fleet at an [impressive rate](#) it will take at least 15 years or more for China to reach US levels in terms of modern ships and submarines.

China currently operates two aircraft carriers, the *Liaoning*, partially built in the Ukraine during the Soviet era, and the *Shandong*, an indigenously built copy of the *Liaoning* with minor improvements. They are no match to the 11 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers operated by the US.

China is building two more aircraft carriers expected to be far more advanced than its current two. The fourth aircraft carrier, the Type 04, is expected to be similar in capabilities to the [US aircraft carriers](#). However, this vessel will only be operational in 2030.

While the Chinese air force and navy have received new aircraft such as the J-15 and J-22, they are still small in numbers and most analysts believe that these new models remain inferior to the US F-22 Raptor and F-35 fighters. The US operates 35 nuclear-powered attack submarines against China's six. The rest of the Chinese attack submarines are diesel powered, slower and noisier than its US opponents.

Taiwan has a 165,000 strong military, over a million men in the reserves, and a modern air force and navy. China would need to land hundreds of thousands of men in the very first waves of invasion and eventually over a million men in any plan to take the island. China does not have the sealift capacity for such an operation.

China's Strategy

China believes that time is on its side. Beijing is expanding its military without compromising its economic growth. China's defence budget for 2021 stood at US\$209.4 billion, about 1.3 percent of its GDP. While some observers question this figure, it is clear that the US outspends all other nations.

In comparison the US spent \$732 billion in 2020. More than the budgets of the next [10 countries combined](#). There is a strong belief among China's leadership that the then Soviet Union went bankrupt and neglected the needs of its people because it engaged in a costly arms race with the US. China wants to avoid the same mistake.

China is confident that it is slowly winning the contest with the US on the economic front. In Africa it has supplanted its rivals while in Asia it is arguably already the most important economic actor. Its \$124 billion Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a symbol of its growing economic clout.

The scuttling of the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) by the Trump administration deprived the US of a vital asset in countering China's growing economic dominance of the region. China's most powerful asset is not its military. It is its economy.

In No Hurry for War with US

Beijing is not in a hurry to go to war; it believes eventually its economy and military will be powerful enough that the US will have no alternative, but to peacefully relinquish its leadership of the region. It will be just like Britain relinquishing its preponderance in the Americas to a rising US in the late 19th century.

More funding for the Indo-Pacific Command is important, but it should be just one part

of the overall strategy of managing China's growing power. The US defeated the Soviet Union in the Cold War not with its military might but by the power of its economy and those of its allies.

For almost five decades the US and the Soviet Union were able to avoid war. There is no reason why the US cannot repeat this with China. For that to happen, it is important to have realistic assessments of China's capabilities and intentions. One must avoid the temptation of threat inflammation.

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