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War and Deterrence in the Taiwan Strait

By Ford Hart

SYNOPSIS

Thirty years ago, prospects for a sustained conflict in the Taiwan Strait were limited. Today, concerns about the outbreak of war there are not unreasonable. It seems unlikely the leadership in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has set a date to seize Taiwan, but peace in the Strait is more fragile than at any time since the 1950s. The possibility of intervention by the United States remains the chief deterrent to a PRC attack, but a growing number of countries in Asia and beyond are attempting to shape the cost-benefit analysis in Beijing on which peace and stability hinge.

COMMENTARY

In principle, there is a danger of a Taiwan war because the PRC leadership has declared its willingness to use military power to achieve its political goals in the Strait. Beijing's policy settings are a matter of choice; one could imagine others less dependent on coercion. Since the international community must take the current settings seriously, other players – especially Washington and Taipei – must behave strategically if they want to reinforce Taiwan Strait stability. Ultimately, however, the chances of a conflict rise and fall on decisions made in Beijing.

Reasonable Worries

Concern over a war in the Taiwan Strait is higher today than at any time in decades because of Beijing's extraordinary build-up of its military forces targeted against Taiwan and their increasingly aggressive posturing. Meanwhile, Beijing also issues strident, unhelpfully ambiguous statements about when the Chinese mainland might attack the island.

In Washington, where peace in the Strait is a longstanding priority, these shifts have prompted understandable debates about Beijing's intentions. Predictions the Chinese

have decided to attack at some fixed time have been unconvincing and unhelpful. Seasoned China watchers, however, fear that, while Beijing may have no hard timeline for an assault, the dangers are increasing it may pursue military options as soon as the late 2020s.

Ultimately, predictions of PRC actions depend on guesswork about the cost-benefit analysis permanently underway in Beijing. While there are reasons to believe China has no fixed timeline for invading Taiwan, PRC behaviour leaves little room for complacency.

China's actions in the South China Sea, in particular, have conclusively demonstrated Beijing's willingness to take bold steps with enormous geopolitical consequence if it believes the downsides are manageable. It is probable China would behave similarly if it ever concluded it could seize Taiwan without paying a significant price.

Beijing's Priorities and Options

For the foreseeable future, however, the price would be very high, indeed. The leadership's domestic agenda alone is daunting. It is hard to believe Taiwan ranks so far above other priorities, such as national prosperity or the political stability the Party incessantly extols, that Beijing would launch a Taiwan Strait war in the absence of a truly profound provocation. In an era of demographic uncertainty, for instance, which PRC leader would lightly advocate an assault on the island, sending thousands, at least, of young Chinese people to their probable death?

Moreover, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is less likely so long as Beijing has alternative, credible means to coerce the island. Informed by both traditional statecraft and Leninist strategy, PRC leaders perceive war as only a part of the spectrum of coercion available to any state. Indeed, Beijing possesses a rich menu of options it would certainly want to explore before resorting to force against Taipei.

Just one page of the menu, the dense connective web that links Taiwan and the Mainland, is full of options the mere threat of which would give Taipei and Washington pause. Until 2008, for instance, the "Three Links" – transportation, trade, and postal connections across the Strait – were a mere dream. Today, they are unwisely assumed to be a given – inevitable and routine. In seeking to compel Taipei's acquiescence, why would Beijing bypass these vulnerabilities and jump straight to the fraught adventure of conflict with America?

Peace Remains Fragile

While these factors temper Beijing's appetite for seizing Taiwan by force, peace and stability in the Strait remain fragile. China's military build-up has given it the option of making the catastrophically bad choice of mounting an attack that its inadequate capabilities 30 years ago helpfully ruled out.

There also is speculation the PRC cannot indefinitely resist the temptation to launch "limited" military actions against Taiwan for what it might believe others would accept as limited goals. The possibility of stumbling into war under these circumstances is deeply worrisome. As its capabilities grow, it becomes accustomed to posturing them

aggressively, and as the top leader's open-ended tenure risks group think, chances for miscalculation rise.

PRC Actions Reshape Deterrence

The international community plays an indispensable role in maintaining a Chinese cost-benefit analysis that favours peace and stability. As Beijing's assertiveness has grown, so has international appreciation of the need to strengthen deterrence.

Ultimately, PRC concern the United States might intervene in a Taiwan Strait war is indispensable. Even if ultimately victorious over Washington, China could suffer catastrophic losses. By the same token, should the possibility of American intervention ever lapse, Beijing's calculus would shift fundamentally.

Meanwhile, despite compelling interest in good relations with the PRC, governments in Tokyo, Manila, and Canberra have all enhanced material cooperation with Washington, and even Seoul has publicly stated its concerns about peace and stability in the Strait. Despite Beijing's portrayal of these developments as American schemes, these countries in fact are deeply alarmed about what PRC behaviour means for their respective strategic interests.

Similarly, further afield, countries that would have no reason to be directly involved in a Taiwan Strait war are nonetheless signaling to Beijing the increasing price it pays in international goodwill through its threats against Taipei. Especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, appreciation of the staggering economic consequences of a conflict in the Strait are prompting a significant number of Asian, European, and other capitals to express public fears about peace and stability there. Horror at the prospects of total war involving a peaceful population nearly the size of Australia's and of hostilities between nuclear powers reinforce the economic fears. The arch tone that flavours Beijing's rejection of "foreign interference" in its dealings with Taiwan underscores PRC sensitivity to these expressions of concern.

Pressure for responsible behaviour in Washington and Taipei is also important. Even if Beijing is the sole player who would choose war, it benefits nobody if feel-good political posturing shifts China's cost-benefit analysis unhelpfully.

Washington and Taipei need to concentrate on practical steps that promote Taiwan's security and reinforce the status quo. The international community has a reasonable expectation they will behave strategically. Their failure to do so weakens deterrence by reducing the international focus on China and helping to sell PRC assertions America and Taiwan are the problem.

Ford Hart worked on Taiwan policy repeatedly during his previous 33-year career as a US diplomat, including at the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon, and in Beijing.
