

A defense white paper released by the Japanese government on Thursday said that the increasing capabilities of the Chinese missile forces, navy and air force create “problems for Taiwan’s weapons modernization.” The paper clearly takes the position that Taiwan must be ready for an inevitable military conflict with China. It appears to urge Taipei to increase military spending, saying that the nation’s defense budget has not increased in nearly two decades, while China’s “public” defense budget last year was 15 times that of Taiwan’s.

Such concerns are ill-founded, as the likelihood of China engaging Taiwan in a military conflict is exceedingly low. Instead, Beijing’s approach has been to pressure Taipei in the international arena — efforts to that end have been ramping up over the past year, including preventing Taiwan from participating in international organizations and pilfering its allies — as well as dividing the nation’s politicians and influencing its youth.

Following the 2014 Sunflower movement, in which government buildings were occupied to protest the passage of a trade agreement with China, Beijing realized that it had to change tactics. Prior to that, it had been manipulating Taiwanese politicians and businesspeople in the hopes that they would influence the public.

Chinese tycoon Guo Wengui (郭文錕) on Wednesday said that Beijing had monitored the private lives of then-president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and his two daughters, quoting a Chinese official as having said: “No doubt we can control him. He will listen to us 100 percent.” Guo suggested that the Chinese government wanted Ma to arrest former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) in a bid to “intimidate” the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). He also suggested that blackmail was a key part of Beijing’s strategy at the time, which is not unbelievable. While the allegations remain unconfirmed, it is undeniable that Ma was close to Chinese leaders, and it was his attempt to tie the nation’s economy with China’s that resulted in a backlash from the Taiwanese public.

China has shifted to a divide-and-conquer strategy offering incentives to independent politicians, such as Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲), and Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) constituencies, such as New Taipei City, while snubbing DPP officials. Ko infamously referred to the two nations as “one family” at a forum in Shanghai last month, but later denied being a pawn of China’s “united front” tactics. Then why did he not bring up the detention of Taiwanese human rights campaigner Lee Ming-che (李明哲) or Taiwan’s exclusion from the World Health Assembly?

Chinese threat is not military action

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After realizing that politicians have limited influence over the nation's youth, China has shifted to cultivating educators and promoting policies it refers to as the "three middles and the youth" — residents of central and southern Taiwan; middle and low-income families; small and medium-sized enterprises; and young people — and "one generation and one stratum" — the younger generation and the grassroots stratum.

Beijing has invited principals from Taiwanese elementary and junior-high schools, as well as members of community groups in KMT-governed New Taipei City, to visit China. Young Taiwanese studying at Chinese universities have been invited to numerous entrepreneurship and job-seeking centers throughout China, with many receiving employment offers that require them to stay in the country. Meanwhile, Chinese students accepted into Taiwanese universities have had their applications for travel documents rejected by Chinese authorities, which China's Taiwan Affairs Office spokesman Ma Xiaoguang (马晓光) said was the result of the agency doing its job to remind students of the state of cross-strait relations.

Why would Beijing go to the trouble of cultivating Taiwan's educators and youth, and dividing politicians, if it was planning imminent military action? Chinese surveillance missions near Taiwan are simply an intimidation tactic. The real Chinese threat is its incentivizing of the nation's youth and manipulation of its politicians.

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