

Ian Easton On Taiwan: So you think China will win?

Written by Taiwan Tati Cultural & Educational Foundation
Monday, 12 February 2018 06:50



Trees growing on the Penghu Islands are often uprooted by the winds that rip across the local landscape every winter. One ancient banyan tree is considered sacred. To survive, this tree has grown horizontally, spreading its branches and roots hundreds of feet outward.

Facing extinction, Taiwan's government has learned to be equally resilient. Abandoned by the world in the 1970s, Taiwan has been diplomatically isolated for decades. This thriving democratic country — a country that is not recognized by the UN as a country — has adapted remarkably well to its circumstances. The Taiwanese, like people everywhere, are born with an innate desire to chart their own unique course into the future.

America and Taiwan have shared values, and both benefit from their diverse and innovative populations. Yet, their national endowments are very different. The US is blessed with great tracts of rich farmland, giant freshwater lakes, powerful rivers, vast forests, and massive deposits of oil, natural gas, coal, copper, gold, and silver. Not Taiwan. Almost completely lacking in natural resources, Taiwan's success story is a testament to the power of hard work and tenacity in the face of adversity.

This island is regularly pummeled by super typhoons, rocked by earthquakes, and hit by cyberattacks. Most concerning, Taiwan faces a growing Chinese invasion threat. Its gigantic neighbor, the People's Republic of China (PRC), has invested heavily in a military buildup that is aimed squarely at conquering Taiwan. War could be coming.

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To prepare the future battlefield, China is undermining international support for Taiwan's legitimate government. On university campuses and in major media headquarters around the world, professors and news editors now feel the pressure to self-censor.

The US State Department has gone to great lengths to ensure that Taiwan is not treated like a real country. Most recently, Foggy Bottom has deleted Taiwan's flag off all government websites. This is a flagrant denial of objective reality. Taiwan's government exists. It was recognized by Washington for 30 years and did not go away just because the American embassy was closed in Taipei and the American Institute in Taiwan (an embassy in all but name) was opened.

Might does not make right. Unfortunately, some officials in Washington seem to think otherwise. Their policy choices play right into the hands of their strategic rivals. In Beijing, Chinese Communist Party officials use feckless American behavior as ammunition in their anti-Taiwan campaign. Their propaganda message is clear: "Resistance is futile. Surrender now."

Some Taiwanese have come to believe that they lack agency and are not in control of their own fate. This loss of self-confidence is dangerous. It breeds passivity and saps morale. Taken to its logical conclusion, it can even produce defeatism. This, in turn, will convince many American observers that Taiwan is a hopeless case.

Yet, the Taiwan-doubters are wrong. The odds are that Taiwan will win its long twilight struggle with China. Here are three often overlooked reasons why:

One, Taiwan can turn to God for help — and Jesus, Allah, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Guan Yin, and Ganesh, too.

Like Americans, the Taiwanese have the right to practice any faith they so choose without any government intervention. They can practice and change their religion or belief however they see fit. This is a basic human right and public good. It makes for a more cohesive and durable society, especially in times of crisis.

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In contrast, China has an established policy of state atheism. Persecution against religious groups has bred deep discontents. And it is getting much uglier. China's dictatorial leader, Xi Jinping (习近平), has made the eradication of all "politically unreliable" faith groups a cornerstone of his rule. In western China, for example, devout Muslims are now routinely imprisoned, tortured, and brainwashed until they deny the existence of Allah.

Orwellian police states tend to have short lifespans. By brutally repressing fundamental human rights, the Chinese authorities are playing with gasoline and matches.

Two, Uncle Sam has Taiwan's back (most of the time).

Washington has struggled living up to the spirit and the letter of the law: the Taiwan Relations Act. Nonetheless, American efforts to support Taiwan's defense and security have given the Taiwanese military advantages that Chinese war planners do not regard lightly. In the eyes of Chinese officers, Taiwan's defenders are almost always better led, better trained, and better equipped than they are.

From their perspective, even more worrisome is the thought of the US military coming to Taiwan's rescue. The Chinese military establishment believes that whoever controls Taiwan will control the future of East Asia and the Western Pacific. They are convinced that Taiwan will decide the outcome of the US-PRC strategic competition. They take it for granted that Uncle Sam will not allow this island to fall into their hands easily. Any great power war over Taiwan could unhinge the Chinese regime.

Three, Taiwan's geography is a general's dream come true. China's is a nightmare.

Taiwan garrisons over a dozen, well-fortified islands just off the coast of China. These granite citadels bristle with missiles, rockets, and artillery guns that could devastate the ports and airbases in Fujian Province, effectively vetoing an enemy invasion before it was launched.

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The Taiwan Strait is another formidable line of defense. Referred to colloquially as the “Black Ditch,” the Taiwan Strait is notorious for its foul weather and rough sailing conditions. Taiwan’s military has no land borders to defend. China borders 14 other sovereign states, many of which are unfriendly or unstable.

Most importantly, Taiwan’s rugged coastline offers China only a handful of feasible landing beaches. Taiwanese military engineers have spent decades preparing them for the worst. Amateurs imagine that the Battle of Taiwan would look something like the D-Day landings. It would actually have far more in common with the Dieppe Raid and the Anzio Campaign.

When considering Taiwan’s future, sunny optimism is certainly not warranted. The challenges facing this tough island nation are daunting.

But if you think Taiwan’s days are numbered, think again.

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