

Taiwan must prepare for attack

Written by Joe Webster
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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) might act aggressively against Taiwan amid the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. While no one is seeking a war, the Republic of China and its friends should responsibly prepare for various contingencies and enhance deterrence against China.

Chinese President Xi Jinping's (习近平) visit to maritime ports in Zhejiang, China, raised eyebrows among China-watchers.

Some have said that Xi conducted the trip to signal the economy's reopening or to offer assurances to the Zhejiang faction, while others have said that the province is home to the East Sea Fleet, which would figure prominently in any blockade or even invasion of Taiwan.

A blockade or invasion is unlikely, but should not be dismissed as alarmist: Beijing has never renounced the use of force against Taiwan, and the People's Liberation Army has behaved provocatively over the past few months.

As China's economic performance weakens and unemployment rises, the CCP might become desperate for noneconomic legitimation — namely, a political “victory” on the issue of Taiwan.

The CCP has always had the motive to coerce Taiwan, but it might regard the chaos of the pandemic as a unique opportunity to secure its objectives.

While the US and Japanese militaries retain fearsome capabilities, the US and Japanese responses to the coronavirus have been unimpressive, and several key military assets would not operate at full capacity for weeks, possibly months.

The end of monsoon season opens a “window of attack” across the Taiwan Strait from next month to July.

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Taiwan can counteract the CCP's attempts to coerce it. Communications between the central government and local authorities could be affected by Chinese cybercapabilities, so Taiwan should prepare for distributed governance and consider diffusing stores of food, seeds, weapons and vehicle fuel across the nation.

Civil defense drills might also be advisable. As oil prices are at historic lows, restocking gasoline and diesel inventories would prove to be a financial windfall for Taiwan, not just strategically sensible.

Taiwan's friends in Washington, Tokyo and beyond should work with Taipei to immediately supply it with weapons, food and fuel.

Simultaneously, all sides must acknowledge the sensitivities of the Taiwan issue.

Washington and Taipei should strike a responsible equilibrium: They should substantively strengthen Taiwan's defenses, but without unnecessary symbolism, which could provoke Beijing. Publicizing any arms sales or transfers would likely decrease rather than enhance Taiwan's security.

The CCP is not likely to invade Taiwan. It would likely fail in the attempt, and even a "successful" invasion would seriously threaten economic and social stability in China, potentially leading to the CCP's collapse.

However, the probability that the CCP would attempt to coerce Taiwan is rising, and Taipei and its friends should calmly address risks together and prepare for difficult weeks ahead.

Joe Webster is editor of China-Russia Report, although the views expressed here are his alone.

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