

On Monday, retired Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force major general Qiao Liang (乔良) issued an unexpected warning on Chinese social media app Weixin. Titled "The Taiwan problem cannot be solved with rashness and radicalism," Qiao warned against "nationalism that could harm the country," and specifically cautioned against voices advocating using the novel coronavirus as a "tactical window" to launch an attack on Taiwan.

Some might be tempted to brush off Qiao's post as just another bit of noise on Chinese social media. However, Qiao is not just any old retired PLA officer. A professor at the PLA National Defense University in Beijing, Qiao coauthored the book *Unrestricted Warfare: China's Master Plan to Destroy America* (《超限战》). First published in 1999, the book sets out a blueprint for defeating the US through non-conventional means and is regarded by many as the most influential book on Chinese grand military strategy since Sun Tzu's (孙子) *The Art of War* (《孙子兵法》). That such a hawkish figure as Qiao felt it necessary to issue a warning about nationalism should ring alarm bells in Taipei and in Washington.

We should not rule out the possibility that Xi's military advisers are telling him he has been gifted a once-in-a-generation opportunity to take military action against Taiwan, while the world's hands are tied dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. As Qiao pointed out, military personnel on at least four of the US Navy's aircraft carrier groups in the Indo-Pacific region have been infected by the virus, which would severely limit Washington's ability to come to Taiwan's aid in the event of an attack, providing the PLA with a tactical advantage.

During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, then-US president John F. Kennedy came under enormous pressure from some of his national security advisers to carry out a pre-emptive strike against the Soviet Union. Fortunately, Kennedy possessed the intellectual capacity to face down his hawkish advisers. By contrast, Xi might have boxed himself into a corner as a result of his jingoistic rhetoric on Taiwan and is finding it difficult to resist his generals.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is also under unprecedented pressure from its citizens due to its criminally negligent bungling of the initial virus outbreak in Wuhan. The party could feel it has no choice but to create the mother of all distractions to stay in power. Witness Argentina in 1982, then-military junta head General Leopoldo Galtieri tried to divert public attention from the nation's chronic economic problems and the regime's human rights violations by invading the Falkland Islands, a British overseas territory long claimed by Buenos Aires.

## PLA general cautions against invasion

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An alternative scenario is that Xi himself is banging the drum for war against the recommendations of his advisers. He has repeatedly threatened to annex Taiwan by force and hinted that time is running out. The behavior of his regime has appeared increasingly recalcitrant, as evidenced by the sinking of a Vietnamese vessel in the South China Sea on April 26. The Chinese *Liaoning* carrier group has been on maneuvers in the East China Sea, which some military observers believe is designed to sow confusion over the landing site of an invasion force, and force the Taiwanese military to disperse troops away from the west coast.

Moreover, Xi is not averse to taking huge strategic gambles, as evidenced by his militarization of the South China Sea and mass incarceration of Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang region.

Qiao attributes increased nationalism, in part, as a reaction to the strident rhetoric emanating from Washington in the past few weeks. The US must ensure it does not push Xi into a corner. Meanwhile, the Taiwanese government must use all assets at its disposal to closely monitor the situation. While an invasion might appear improbable, history is littered with examples of rash military adventurism that defy conventional wisdom at the time.

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