

## Why China would not take Taiwan

Written by Jerome Keating  
Saturday, 08 August 2020 04:50

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With its passing of Hong Kong's new National Security Law, the People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to tighten its noose on Hong Kong.

Gone is the broken 1997 promise that Hong Kong would have free, democratic elections by 2017. Gone also is any semblance that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) plays the long game.

All the CCP had to do was hold the fort until 2047, when the "one country, two systems" framework would end and Hong Kong would rejoin the "motherland."

It would be a "demonstration-free" event.

Instead, with the seemingly benevolent velvet glove off, the CCP has revealed its true iron hand. As a result, pundits are predicting that Chinese President Xi Jinping's (习近平) next step is to set his sights on taking Taiwan.

That will not happen. Although Chinese aircraft intrude more and more into Taiwan's airspace, the nation will not become part of China now or in the coming decades. It might be in Xi's dreams, and those of his wishful followers, but not in reality.

Four basic reasons reveal why:

First, the world continues in process as expressed by mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (Process and Reality) echoing the Greek philosopher Heraclitus: "Everything flows; you can't step in the same river twice."

History is linear, not cyclical, despite the narrative that Chinese propagandists and thought spinners like to tout. It might deceptively go in a spiral fashion and it might not always go

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forward, but its spiral character remains linear.

The challenge is not questioning its nature, but how to interpret it in its various stages.

For China, this means its Machiavellian ambition can no longer be hidden. The size of the Tiananmen Square Massacre and its cover up continue to be revealed. The benevolent reception of the “1997 handover” is no more.

True, China’s “Great Firewall” can still hide many abuses, organ theft and power grabs in Xinjiang, Tibet and throughout China, but even the truth of this slowly continues to come out. There is no mandate of heaven for Xi to claim.

The post-COVID-19 world and the rapidity of communications bear part of the responsibility for this exposure. Both blatantly lay bare any benevolent image of a team player that China has tried to foster in the past.

Further, China might still have its panda huggers, trade sellouts and useful idiots, but as far as the reality of Taiwan’s status remains: The PRC flag has never flown over Taiwan, and China by treaty or any other rights, has no legitimate claim to the nation.

Finally, more and more nations are recognizing or admitting both this and the difference between accepting the “one China” principle and the “one China” policy that had been merged in past spin.

The second reason flows from the first: China and Xi also have growing internal problems.

This might seem strange since Xi has been doing everything he can to consolidate his power within. He even seems to have guaranteed his right to perpetual rule.

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Much is in Xi's favor. There are even some quisling profiteers within Taiwan that could aid him, but they would not be enough.

In consolidating power, Xi has unfortunately created as many enemies and separate perspectives within as Mao Zedong (毛泽东).

However, Mao was fortunate, as his issues have never been fully exposed throughout China since the CCP depends on him for past legitimacy. Xi is not that lucky.

Xi's enemies remain and they wait for his faltering and downfall. What seems to be his advantage is in reality what also exposes his weak side, and it is linked to the slowing economic growth in China.

Solving the "Taiwan problem" by force would of course provide an excellent means of deflecting attention from these internal problems and power struggles. Because of Taiwan's situation, that would not be enough. Xi's and China's problems would multiply.

As these problems grow, some might therefore conclude that Xi could decide to risk everything and make a quick, all-out attack on Taiwan. Unfortunately, Taiwan would not be that easily taken.

The third reason and challenge that prevents China from taking Taiwan comes from Taiwan and its many unique facets.

There is the reality of Taiwan's landscape. It is its own fortress. China would need a large invasion force, which would be easily detected in the age of satellites.

There are few good landing areas and Taiwan has a prepared army and navy. They might not be as strong as China's, but they are ready for an attack. That would take massive numbers and take its toll.

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In addition, Taiwan's large mountainous areas would easily support continued guerrilla warfare.

The size of Taiwan proper is a separate factor. It is 36,193km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 23.6 million people. It is 17th in population density where most other ranked areas are overpopulated cities and small city-states. Since a large percentage of the island is mountainous, that shrinks the living space all the more.

The Tibet Autonomous Region on the other hand has 1,200,000km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 3.8 million. Taiwan has about 652 people per square kilometer, while Tibet has 3.2 people per square kilometer. There is no way that China could use settler colonialism and power on Taiwan as it does in Tibet.

Thus, even if China would succeed in capturing a resistant Taiwan, it would need an occupying force of a large magnitude to control this already densely populated space. How would they all fit in?

There are also the Taiwanese. They have lived in a full democracy since 1996. They have voted for their president and seen the office change parties from the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), back once again to the KMT, only to return to the DPP.

Involved in this is the increasing number of Taiwanese who only know democracy. Born from 1990 onward, they started elementary school with the 1996 election. They are now 30 years old and, with the voting age set at 20, the number of "democracy only" voters increases each year.

Fully knowing democracy, they can easily smell the dictatorship in China and see the abuses and broken promises in Hong Kong. If Hong Kongers can resist China, there is no question that democratic Taiwanese would resist China all the more strongly.

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The fourth reason acknowledges that all this would not take place in a vacuum. All nations would be watching if China attacks Taiwan. Those with a particular vested interest would be nearby nations like Japan and India, and those of Southeast Asia.

However, the US, which bears the responsibility of the ambiguous 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty, also has reasons for preserving Taiwan's democracy.

The US has finally realized that developing China's economy has not made China a benevolent partner in world growth. The PRC's salami slicing method for acquiring new territory is taking its toll, especially in the South China Sea. The dream that the CCP would reform if economically given the chance has passed.

Japan would join in battle. It has always known the dangers created if China would ever take control of Taiwan. Trade with China is important to Japan, but it would be trumped by the security provided by a free Taiwan.

Even India would consider entering this game. It too has seen the other side of China and realizes the dangers of China controlling not only the South China Sea, but also the rivers that feed India and Southeast Asia.

China has many vulnerable spots. If any of the many powers involved, including Taiwan, would place a few missiles in the already weakening structures of the Three Gorges Dam, massive damage would follow.

This is the growing practicality of Taiwan's position. Sooner or later other nations will see the threat from China and have to choose. Lines will be drawn not just in the proverbial sand, but also in the waters of the South China Sea.

This does not mean that Taiwan can be complacent and let history take its course. It is also part of the process and must participate by continually supporting its democracy.

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As a longtime resident commentator who has witnessed Taiwan's changeover from martial law, to the 1996 presidential elections when the PRC tried to intimidate Taiwan by shooting missiles on each side of the nation, to attending Hong Kong's 1997 takeover, to watching Taiwan's protests after China's 2005 "Anti-Secession" Law, and much more, I have seen Taiwan's democracy continue to grow and prosper despite its many ups and downs.

Because of that and these four reasons, it is easy to make and stand by this straightforward prediction: In the coming decades, regardless of Xi's wishes or posturing, China will not take or rule Taiwan.

*Jerome Keating is a writer based in Taipei.*

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