

## Are war clouds on the horizon?

Written by Ian Easton  
Monday, 31 May 2021 06:00

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“Is there going to be a war over Taiwan soon?” That dark question recently invaded and occupied the imagination of the international community. The ensuing media frenzy produced some wild exaggeration and undue defeatism. That’s unfortunate because questions of war and peace deserve careful examination, this one more than most.

First the good news. Contrary to what you may have heard, it seems unlikely that war clouds are lurking on the horizon. The Chinese government and military are not yet prepared for an invasion of Taiwan. We are not seeing serious indications that an invasion is imminent.

For all the bluster of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propagandists at the Global Times, no one is actually dying in China or Taiwan. There have been no reports showing People’s Liberation Army (PLA) units engaged in highly realistic and complex training. Scripted drills look great on camera. Hardcore prewar training is ugly, and it often comes at a steep cost in lives lost.

To date, there have been zero attempts to assassinate President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), and no obvious efforts to soften up the Taiwanese government and society for an all-out attack. Reported incidents of riots, sabotage, prison breaks, fuel shortages, mafia violence, water poisonings, and other potential warning signs of invasion have been exactly what you’d expect in Taiwan’s super-safe society: either extremely rare, or nonexistent.

By all appearances, the PLA is methodically preparing for a future offensive, something which it could probably only hope to pull off years from now. In his now-famous testimony before the US Congress, Admiral Philip Davidson stated that the PLA threat against Taiwan would manifest itself by 2027. He didn’t predict what that might look like and whether the opposition would win.

Now the bad news. A political-military crisis might be looming. An accident at sea or in the air could occur at any time, leading to a series of strategic mistakes that might spiral out of control. A PLA attack on Taiwan’s outer islands is feasible. And, even in the best-case scenario, we can expect the PLA’s political warfare operations to intensify. Tensions are set to worsen.

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Since January 2020, the CCP has significantly increased its campaign of coercion against Taiwan. After decades of tacitly agreeing to the Taiwan Strait centerline, Beijing now claims the line means nothing and no longer exists. Chinese military aircraft have been crossing over in remarkable numbers. That's a troubling move. It says something bad about CCP intentions.

Satellite imagery has captured the construction of new Chinese military infrastructure across from Taiwan, including airstrips for what is anticipated to be an enormous influx of factory-fresh helicopters. New PLA amphibious units are coming online, along with large amphibious assault ships to carry them. And that's just the tip of the spear.

China's military-industrial complex is engaged in a sweeping armaments program. Nothing comparable has been seen in peacetime since the 1930s. This too says something bad about CCP intentions.

The most significant factor influencing the current situation seems to be Xi Jinping's (习近平) own militant worldview and aggressive behavior. He has purged his way to power and become an absolute dictator. That's genuinely dangerous for everyone.

Under normal circumstances, we could take comfort in the thought that the regime in Beijing is not likely to order an attack on Taiwan because it's not collectively insane. Unfortunately, our history books are full of tyrants like Xi. Many of them end up going mad.

It must also be acknowledged that to Xi's eyes, war could soon look like a rational choice. After all, he has already gotten away with the annexation of Hong Kong and genocide in Xinjiang. The international community's craven track record might convince him that the world needs China so much it will allow him to commit even more crimes against humanity. Recent history may lead Xi to miscalculate.

Fortunately, there's much Taiwan can do to better protect itself. It could acquire and field thousands of missiles of all ranges. It could build a bigger and better trained ground force, with a focus on elite units that specialize in urban warfare such as marines and military police. And Taiwan's massive reserve force could benefit from equally massive reforms.

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The Taiwanese government could stockpile munitions and supplies. It could better educate the public about the threat, so that everyday citizens have confidence and know how to contribute if a man-made disaster should occur. Enoch Wu (吳恩德) has started a resilience training initiative in Taiwan. His extraordinary program could be expanded and scaled-up.

For its part, the United States could send marines and special operations forces to Taiwan on a long-term training, advisory, and liaison mission. The US could begin military exercises with the Taiwanese military and send high-ranking generals and admirals to visit. Today, vanishingly few senior leaders at the Pentagon could give President Biden expert counsel in the event of a Taiwan Strait crisis. They've never even toured Taipei, let alone examined the coastal battlespace with their own eyes.

The worst thing the US could do would be to continue its current policy of diplomatically isolating Taiwan, keeping it vulnerable as a concession to Beijing. American leaders shouldn't be rewarding Xi's campaign of coercion. They should be working harder to deter him from attacking Taiwan.

Officials in Washington and Taipei don't yet seem to have a clear vision and strategy for the future of US-Taiwan relations. They need to articulate one. The current ambiguity surrounding America's policy toward Taiwan is destabilizing; it isolates Taipei, emboldens Beijing, and invites miscalculation on all sides.

When considering the question of Taiwan's security, there will be less cause for concern when policymakers stop reacting to CCP propaganda and start adapting to facts on the ground.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2021/05/31](#)