

Chinese miscalculation a real threat

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When analyzing Taiwan-China tensions, most people assume that the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) consists of rational actors. Embedded within this belief are three further suppositions: First, Beijing would only launch an attack on Taiwan if it were in China's national interest; second, it would only attack if the odds were overwhelmingly in its favor; and third, Chinese decisionmakers interpret information objectively and through the same lens as other actors.

These assumptions have underpinned recent analyses — including by Minister of National Defense Chiu Kuo-cheng (邱國治) — concluding that there is no immediate danger of a Chinese attack against Taiwan. The consensus is that the earliest an attack could occur is 2025, and there is a substantial body of opinion that an invasion even then is unlikely.

However, what if CCP panjandrams and PLA top brass do not share the same assumptions? Several recent signs indicate that this might be the case.

Speaking on Wednesday at a forum organized by Taiwanese think tank the Institute for National Policy Research, former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe said that “a Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency, and therefore an emergency for the Japan-US alliance. People in Beijing, [Chinese] President Xi Jinping (習近平) in particular, should never have a misunderstanding in recognizing this.” Abe also urged the CCP “not to choose the wrong path.”

Abe is not the only former leader to issue a warning to Beijing against military adventurism. During a keynote address at the annual Yushan Forum on Oct. 8, former Australian prime minister Tony Abbott said: “Sensing that its relative power might have peaked, with its population aging, its economy slowing and its finances creaking, it's quite possible that Beijing could lash out disastrously very soon.”

In the past few months, US President Joe Biden and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken have said that the US would defend Taiwan were China to attack, in a marked departure from Washington's typically scrupulous adherence to its decades-long policy of “strategic ambiguity” over Taiwan.

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These warnings, made at a high level by serving and retired politicians from Japan and members of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance, suggest that the intelligence and foreign policy community is concerned about the potential for a catastrophic misreading of the situation by Beijing.

British Secret Intelligence Service Chief Richard Moore added another note of caution during a rare speech on Tuesday. Moore focused heavily on China, which he said is the organization's top priority, and delivered a blunt warning concerning Taiwan.

“The Chinese Communist Party leadership increasingly favor bold and decisive action justified on national security grounds. The days of [former Chinese leader] Deng Xiaoping's [] ‘hide your strength, bide your time’ are long over,” he said. “Beijing believes its own propaganda about Western frailties and underestimates Washington's resolve. The risk of Chinese miscalculation through overconfidence is real.”

This should give the government pause. Moore appears genuinely concerned that Beijing could miscalculate over Taiwan. That this is the case should not be altogether surprising.

The US “culture wars” have reached fever pitch, polarizing US politics to an unprecedented degree, leading to a tinderbox of race protests and riots that give the appearance to Chinese leaders who obsess over “order” and “harmony” that the US is on the brink of societal collapse. “America First” isolationist policies, the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan, Biden's plummeting approval ratings and his perceived frailty could lead Xi and his closed-off coterie of hawkish advisers to conclude that the time to act is now. Taiwan cannot afford to let its guard down.

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