

Jyrki Kallio, Senior Research Fellow, FIIA

IS CHINA PREPARING TO INVADE TAIWAN?

THE TIME MAY BE OPPORTUNE, BUT THE OVERALL SITUATION IS NOT

Speculation is rife that China could take advantage of the potential confusion during the US presidential election and invade Taiwan. Although China has never relinquished the military option for resolving the Taiwan issue, there are sound reasons to downplay the risk of a military confrontation at the present time.

The Taiwan issue is a thorn in the side of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Since 1949, the reality has been the co-existence of two Chinese governments, namely the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China on Taiwan (ROC). Although only fifteen states currently recognize the ROC instead of the PRC, this undermines the PRC's claims that there is only one China and that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China.

For forty years, the PRC's goal has remained the "peaceful reunification of China" under the principle of "one country, two systems". However, the military

option is explicitly maintained as a last resort. A military conflict between China and Taiwan could also involve the USA. According to the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, any efforts to determine the status of Taiwan by other than peaceful means endanger US interests.

Due to the CPC's historical narrative, centring on the "humiliations" affecting China's territorial integrity and sovereignty, reunification has become tied to the legitimacy of the Party. In 2012, CPC leader Xi Jinping declared his "China Dream" aimed at the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". Set to happen by the 100th

anniversary of the establishment of the PRC in 2049, the rejuvenation includes Chinese reunification.

Many factors point to the end of 2020 as a window of opportunity for the PRC to achieve reunification through military means. First, the USA is looking the other way. While there is great uncertainty about the role of the US in such a conflict, China cannot disregard the risk of going to war with the USA. The upcoming presidential election looks set to create such internal confusion in the US that the ability of its administration to take decisive action would be severely hampered.

Second, the developments in

Taiwan are worrisome for the PRC. In the election early this year, the Democratic Progressive Party, which has its roots in the popular movement calling for independence as “the Republic of Taiwan”, secured a further four years in power. Furthermore, the events in Hong Kong have eroded trust towards the “one country, two systems” solution, meaning that China’s reunification strategy has now completely lost its edge.

Third, resolving the Taiwan issue once and for all would make Xi Jinping one of the PRC’s greatest leaders. 2049 is a long way off for him personally, so there could be a temptation to act now. The way Xi has been amassing powers has not been welcomed by everyone within the CPC, and he has duly come in for criticism. An invasion of Taiwan would certainly divert attention away from the criticism as well as the bleak economic outlook, and would serve as the highlight of the CPC 100th anniversary celebrations in 2021.

The international media have pointed to various signs that the PRC is gearing up for an invasion. According to reports, the PRC has upgraded its missile bases in the southeast. Marine corps bases have been expanded. A new air defence system has been deployed. Moreover, there have been several

military drills, even an invasion drill, and military incursions into Taiwan’s air defence zone.

While the timing of an invasion would be opportune, there are nevertheless sound arguments for concluding that a war is not imminent. First, the outcome of a military operation is far from certain. Despite China’s missile capabilities and possible air supremacy, landing forces would have to be deployed, facing a possibly long-drawn-out resistance. The CPC would hardly want to risk the festiveness of its anniversary, aiming to show that it has far outlived its counterpart in the former Soviet Union.

Second, while the PRC population is largely in favour of reunification, and young people in particular are often fervently patriotic, a war over Taiwan could be a bridge too far. Many people have close family and business ties to the island. There would also be casualties among PRC soldiers, and possibly even civilians. Further, if the operation failed, the highest leadership would be to blame.

Third, the international repercussions could have a devastating effect on China’s economic performance. While the Taiwan issue is so important for the CPC’s legitimacy that losing external goodwill in exchange for reunification would be a small price to pay, more extreme

reactions cannot be ruled out. There has been such a tremendous shift in attitudes this year among many of its most important economic partners – especially the USA, the EU and Australia – that the PRC could expect to face severe countermeasures.

All in all, an invasion would result in a major loss of regional and economic stability, not to mention countless lives. Even if the operation was militarily successful, it could morph into a major catastrophe for the CPC in terms of popular unrest. The Party would need to find a scapegoat, and that role could fall to Xi Jinping himself. Even the legitimacy of the Party would be at stake.

Therefore, it is likely that China’s recent show of military muscle in the Taiwan Strait is meant to warn the future administration in the USA, as well as the people in Taiwan, that China will not tolerate attempts to change Taiwan’s status quo. There are two situations where China would in all likelihood react militarily, namely if the USA were to set up military bases on Taiwan, or if Taiwan were to declare itself “the Republic of Taiwan”. The PRC is no doubt trying to ward off such escalatory developments at present. Unfortunately, the methods used are provocative, and may lead to provocations from others as well. Now is the time for all parties to keep a cool head. /