

WHY CHINA WON'T INVADE TAIWAN.... FOR NOW

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On the sidelines of the Asia

Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leader's Meeting in San Francisco last month, Chinese leader Xi Jinping told U.S. President Joe Biden that Taiwan is the “biggest” and “most dangerous issue” between the United States and China.

In response, Biden asserted the U.S. commitment to defending “Indo-Pacific allies.” Should the U.S. worry about an impending invasion in the Taiwan Strait?

Predictions of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan range mostly from 2027 to 2050, although one U.S. admiral even suggested an attack before 2024. Some have begun to warn of an earlier invasion if the United States becomes increasingly entangled in wars in Europe and the Middle East, creating a possible three-front war. Others, including Taiwan's own foreign minister, believe Xi may pounce on Taiwan if China's domestic problems threaten Xi's grip on power.

In contrast to the constant bombardment of warnings on Taiwan's perilous future, the Biden-Xi summit, and evolving China-Taiwan-U.S. dynamics suggest a slim probability of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan in the short-term. While China's long-term intention for Taiwan remains unchanged, there are reasons to believe that peace will hold in the Taiwan Strait, for now.

The Biden-Xi summit in San Francisco was the first time Xi had travelled to the U.S. since his meeting with then-President Donald Trump in Mar-a-Lago in 2017. The imagery of Xi and Biden walking shoulder to shoulder through the Filoli Estate Garden effectively demonstrated the essence of the meeting: the desire on both sides to stabilize relations and reduce risks of war.

One breakthrough reached was the resumption of military-to-military contact, which China had previously severed following then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. Military engagement and open channels of communication allow for the management of accidents and crises that could unintentionally accelerate into a

full-blown war.

Addressing the Taiwan issue, Xi reassured Biden of his hope for peaceful “reunification” in the Taiwan Strait and denied any plans for China to invade Taiwan in 2027 during the meeting. Similarly, Biden pledged to adhere to the “One China policy” and vowed to not support “Taiwan independence.”

These reassurances, while limited to rhetoric, reinforce guardrails on the deteriorating China-U.S. relations and serve to soften mutual threat perceptions driving the escalation of tensions. On one side is China’s fear of Taiwan pursuing *de jure* independence, and on the other is U.S. concern about a military invasion of Taiwan by China.

The APEC meeting not only marked the beginning of a shift away from confrontation over the Taiwan issue but also the culmination of trends moving away from military conflict:

Namely, the United States’ and Taiwan’s continued improvements in defense capability to fend off an invasion, China’s turn inward to focus on domestic issues, and Taiwan’s commitment to maintaining the status quo.

These trends also refute beliefs predicting a Chinese diversionary war, or China taking advantage of a window of opportunity to invade Taiwan.

U.S. arm sales and military aid to Israel and Ukraine have not completely diverted defense equipment allocated for deterring an attack on Taiwan. The Biden administration for the first time authorized an arms package, worth \$345 million, for Taiwan transferred directly from Pentagon stockpiles.

U.S. Army General Charles Flynn, who heads the army unit of the Indo-Pacific Command, recently announced the future deployment of land-based Tomahawk and SM-6 cruise missiles to the Asia-Pacific following the deployment of NMESIS, a land-based anti-ship missile system.

Far from distracting the United States from responding to China’s growing military prowess, the Ukraine war has spurred the U.S. defense industrial base to increase its manufacturing capacity, preparing the U.S to deter an invasion and fight a potential war of attrition in the Indo-Pacific.

Indeed, there is also a strong consensus in Washington that U.S. resolve for aiding Ukraine and Israel has bolstered deterrence and changed China’s calculus for a Taiwan operation.

Taiwan is not putting all its bets on the U.S. intervening in a contingency either. President Tsai Ing-wen has placed defense self-sufficiency and manufacturing at the center of her policy objectives.

Taiwan’s military under the Tsai administration has invested heavily in domestic defense R&D and manufacturing, leading to the launch of its first domestically manufactured attack submarine and deployment of supersonic cruise missiles capable of reaching Beijing.

Despite the arms backlogs from the United States, Taiwan’s domestic industrial base, with U.S. assistance, supports a formidable force for denying an invasion.

As the presidential and legislative election approaches in Taiwan, there is a renewed possibility for Taiwan to adopt political stances that could provoke an attack. The presidential candidate of Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), William Lai, is viewed in Beijing as "pro-independence."

He recently nominated for vice president Hsiao Bi-khim, Taiwan's ex envoy to the United States, who is currently sanctioned by China for aiding "Taiwan independence."

In light of Lai's history of pro-independence beliefs, should he win election China may very well continue its policy of no contact and gray-zone military pressure against Taipei. Taiwan continues to report Chinese military aircraft incursions into its surrounding airspaces and the continued presence of Chinese naval vessels near the island.

However, all presidential candidates have vowed to preserve the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. Even Lai, who has historically had a tendency toward Taiwan independence, unequivocally asserted his commitment to the status quo and denied any necessity to declare formal independence.

Taiwan's restraint from declaring independence diminishes the likelihood of inadvertent escalations and garners international solidarity and the moral high ground.

On the other side, China is suffering from a stubborn economy that is failing to recover following strict COVID-19 restrictions during the pandemic. China is forecasted to have slower GDP growth, falling under 5 percent, next year, partially attributed to its sluggish property sector.

In addition, China's foreign direct investment dropped into negative territory for the first time since 1998.

China's economic crisis could negatively impact public support and trust. The last published youth unemployment rate, before authorities suspended reporting in June, was hovering above 20 percent.

Some local governments ridden with debt were forced to reduce healthcare benefits, prompting public protests. A potentially failing economy, lack of opportunity and absence of social safety net poses a potential threat to public order.

One theory holds that China will become more assertive abroad as it struggles domestically. But it seems more likely that Chinese leaders perceive a diversionary war against Taiwan as a risk to their governance.

Xi Jinping, at a dinner with tech CEOs in San Francisco, reassured that China will not go to war, and urged reconsideration of the number one question: "Are we adversaries or partners?" While trivial on the surface, these actions reflect the Chinese leadership's effort to seek out foreign investment amidst U.S. technology export controls and skepticism from the U.S. business community.

Xi's trip to San Francisco suggests the prioritization of improving China-U.S. relations and mending China's increasingly negative image for business and investment.

U.S. and Taiwanese efforts to bolster deterrence have not faltered with the outbreak of wars in Europe and the Middle East. Meanwhile, China, despite its pressing issues at home, has attempted to mend ties abroad.

Contrary to speculation that China would divert domestic pressure through military adventurism in the Taiwan Strait, China has toned down “wolf warrior” rhetoric against the West and U.S allies in the Asia-Pacific.

Sound foreign policymaking requires an accurate assessment of risk in the Taiwan Strait, free from alarmist nor naïve optimism. So, policymakers should be cognizant of the trend toward a thawing China-U.S. relationship and less assertive Chinese foreign policy.

The Biden-Xi summit, while symbolic at large, presented a potential path around the Taiwan issue and created space for cooperation on pressing shared objectives. Indeed, Xi offered to send pandas to California after recalling them from Washington for a reason.

China needs a stable external environment, technology, and capital, not gunfire across the Taiwan Strait.

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