

Is a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan Imminent?

Or Is Washington in a Tizzy over Nothing?

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Is China really on the verge of invading the island of Taiwan, as so many top American officials seem to believe? If the answer is "yes" and the U.S. intervenes on Taiwan's side — as President Biden has [sworn](#) it would — we could find ourselves in a major-power conflict, possibly even a nuclear one, in the not-too-distant future. Even if confined to Asia and fought with conventional weaponry alone — no sure thing — such a conflict would still result in human and economic damage on a far greater scale than observed in Ukraine today.

But what if the answer is "no," which seems at least as likely? Wouldn't that pave the way for the U.S. to work with its friends and allies, no less than with China itself, to reduce tensions in the region and possibly open a space for the launching of peaceful negotiations between Taiwan and the mainland? If nothing else, it would eliminate the need to boost the Pentagon budget by many billions of dollars annually, as now advocated by China hawks in Congress.

How that question is answered has enormous implications for us all. Yet, among policymakers in Washington, it isn't even up for discussion. Instead, they seem to be competing with each another to identify the year in which the purported Chinese invasion will occur and war will break out between our countries.

Is It 2035, 2027, or 2025?

All high-level predictions of an imminent Chinese invasion of Taiwan rest on the assumption that Chinese leaders will never allow that island to become fully independent and so will respond to any move in that direction with a full-scale military assault. In justifying such claims, American officials regularly point to the ongoing modernization of China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and warnings by top Chinese officials that they will crush any effort by "separatist elements" in Taiwan to impede unification. In line with that mode of thinking, only one question remains: Exactly when will the Chinese leadership consider

the PLA ready to invade Taiwan and overpower any U.S. forces sent to the island's relief?

Until 2021, U.S. military officials tended to place that pivotal moment far in the future, citing the vast distance the PLA needed to go to duplicate the technological advantages of U.S. forces. Pentagon analysts [most often forecast](#) 2035 for this achievement, the date set by President Xi Jinping for China to “basically complete the modernization of national defense and the military.”

This assessment, however, changed dramatically in late 2021 when the Department of Defense published its annual report on the military power of the People's Republic of China (PRC). That document [highlighted](#) a significant alteration in China's strategic planning: whereas its leaders once viewed 2035 as the year in which the PLA would become a fully modern fighting force, they now sought to reach that key threshold in 2027, by accelerating the “intelligentization” of their forces (that is, their use of artificial intelligence and other advanced technologies). If realized, the Pentagon report suggested, that “new milestone for modernization in 2027... would provide Beijing with more credible military options in a Taiwan contingency.”

Still, some Pentagon officials [suggested](#) that the PLA was unlikely to achieve full “intelligentization” by then, casting doubt on its ability to overpower the U.S. in a hypothetical battle for Taiwan. That, however, hasn't stopped Republicans from using the prediction to generate alarm in Congress and seek additional funds for weaponry geared toward a future war with China.

As Representative Mike Gallagher (R-WI) [put it](#) in 2022, when he was still a minority member of the House Armed Services Committee, “China's just throwing so much money into military modernization and has already sped up its timeline to 2027 for when it wants the PLA to have the capability to seize Taiwan, that we need to act with a sense of urgency to tackle that threat because that is something unlike anything we've seen in modern history.” And note that he is now the chairman of the new China-bashing [House Select Committee on China](#).

A potential 2027 invasion remained common wisdom in U.S. policy circles until this January, when the head of the Air Force Mobility Command, General Michael Minihan, told his troops that he suspected the correct date for a future war with China was 2025, [setting off](#) another panic attack in Washington. “I hope I am wrong,” he [wrote](#) to the 50,000 Air Force personnel under his command. “My gut tells me we will fight in 2025. Xi secured his third term and set his war council in October 2022. Taiwan's presidential elections are in 2024 and will offer Xi a reason. The United States' presidential elections are in 2024 and will offer Xi a distracted America. Xi's team, reason, and opportunity are all aligned for 2025.”

Though his prediction was [derided](#) by some analysts who doubted the PRC's capacity to overpower the U.S. by that date, Minihan received strong backing from China hawks in Congress. “I hope he's wrong as well, but I think he's right, though, unfortunately,” [said](#) Representative Michael McCaul (R-TX), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, in an interview on Fox News Sunday.

At this point, official Washington continues to obsess over the date of the presumptive Chinese invasion, with some figures [now suggesting](#) 2024. Strangely enough, however, nowhere in official circles is there a single prominent figure asking the most basic question

of all: Does China actually have any serious intention of invading Taiwan or are we manufacturing a crisis over nothing?

China's Invasion Calculus

To answer that question means investigating Beijing's calculus when it comes to the relative benefits and perils of mounting such an invasion.

To start off: China's top leadership has repeatedly stated that it's prepared to employ force as a *last resort* to ensure Taiwan's unification with the mainland. President Xi and his top lieutenants repeat this mantra in every major address they make. "Taiwan is China's Taiwan," Xi characteristically [told](#) the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) last October. "We will continue to strive for peaceful reunification with the greatest sincerity and the utmost effort, but we will never promise to renounce the use of force and we reserve the option of taking all measures necessary."

In addition, vigorous efforts have gone into enhancing the PLA's capacity to invade that island, located 100 miles across the Taiwan Strait from the Chinese mainland. The PLA has substantially expanded its naval arm, the PLA Navy (PLAN), and especially its amphibious assault component. The PLAN, in turn, has conducted numerous amphibious exercises up and down the Chinese coast, many suggesting practice for a possible invasion of Taiwan. According to the Pentagon's 2022 report on Chinese military power, such maneuvers have [increased](#) in recent years, with 20 of them conducted in 2021 alone.

Exercises like these certainly indicate that Chinese leaders are building the capacity to undertake an invasion, should they deem it necessary. But issuing threats and acquiring military capabilities do not necessarily signify intent to take action. The CCP's top leaders are survivors of ruthless intraparty struggles and know how to calculate risks and benefits. However strongly they may feel about Taiwan, they are not inclined to order an invasion that could result in China's defeat and their own disgrace, imprisonment, or death.

Weighing the Risks

Even under the best of circumstances, an amphibious assault on Taiwan would prove exceedingly difficult and dangerous. Transporting tens of thousands of PLA troops across 100 miles of water while under constant attack by Taiwanese and (probably) U.S. forces and depositing them on heavily defended beachheads could easily result in disaster. As Russia discovered in Ukraine, conducting a large-scale assault against spirited resistance can prove extremely difficult — even when invading by land. And keep in mind that the PLA hasn't engaged in significant armed combat since 1979, when it [lost](#) a war with Vietnam (though it has had some [border skirmishes](#) with India in recent years). Even if it managed to secure a beachhead in Taiwan, its forces would undoubtedly lose dozens of ships, hundreds of planes, and many thousands of troops — with no assurance of securing control over Taipei or other major cities.

Just such an outcome emerged in multiple war games conducted in 2022 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Washington-based think tank. Those simulations, performed by figures with "a variety of senior governmental, think tank, and military backgrounds," always began with a PLA amphibious assault on Taiwan accompanied by air and missile attacks on critical government infrastructure. But "the Chinese invasion quickly founders," a [CSIS summary](#) suggests. "Despite massive Chinese bombardment,

Taiwanese ground forces stream to the beachhead, where the invaders struggle to build up supplies and move inland. Meanwhile, U.S. submarines, bombers, and fighter/attack aircraft, often reinforced by Japan Self-Defense Forces, rapidly cripple the Chinese amphibious fleet. China's strikes on Japanese bases and U.S. surface ships cannot change the result: Taiwan remains autonomous."

Those like General Minihan who predict an imminent Chinese invasion usually neglect to mention such hardcore assessments, but other military analysts have been less reticent. Buried deep in the Pentagon's [2022 report](#) on Chinese military power, for example, is the following: "An attempt to invade Taiwan would likely strain PRC's armed forces and invite international intervention. Combined with inevitable force attrition... these factors make an amphibious invasion of Taiwan a significant political and military risk for Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party."

Surely Xi's generals and admirals have conducted similar war games and reached comparable conclusions. Chinese leaders are also painfully aware of the sanctions imposed by the U.S. and its allies on Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine and recognize that an invasion of Taiwan would [automatically result in](#) similar penalties. Add in the potential damage to Chinese infrastructure from U.S. bombers and the country's economic prospects could be crushed for years to come — a likely death sentence for the Chinese Communist Party. Why, then, even think about an invasion?

There's No Hurry

Add in one other factor. China's leaders seem to have concluded that time is on their side — that the Taiwanese people will, eventually, voluntarily decide to unite with the mainland. This approach is spelled out in Beijing's [recent white paper](#), "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era," released last August by the Taiwan Affairs Office of the PRC's State Council. As China grows increasingly prosperous, the paper argues, the Taiwanese — especially young Taiwanese — will see ever greater benefits from unification, diminishing the appeal of independence, or "separatism."

"China's development and progress, and in particular the steady increases in its economic power, technological strength, and national defense capabilities, are an effective curb against separatist activities," the paper states. "As more and more compatriots from Taiwan, especially young people, pursue their studies, start businesses, seek jobs, or go to live on the mainland... the economic ties and personal bonds between the people on both sides run deeper... leading cross-Straits relations towards reunification."

And keep in mind that this is not a short-term proposition but a strategy that will take years — even decades — to achieve success. Nevertheless, most of that white paper's content is devoted not to military threats — the only parts of the paper to receive coverage in the West — but to bolstering bilateral trade and increasing China's economic appeal to young Taiwanese. "Following the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the mainland has improved its governance and maintained long-term economic growth," it asserts. "As a result, the overall strength and international influence of the mainland will continue to increase, and its influence over and appeal to Taiwan society will keep growing."

In such a take-it-slow approach surely lies a recognition that military action against Taiwan could prove a disaster for China. But whatever the reasoning behind such planning, it appears that Chinese leaders are prepared to invest massive resources in persuading the

Taiwanese that reunification is in their best interests. Whether or not such a strategy [will succeed](#) is unknown. It's certainly possible that a Taiwanese preference for political autonomy will [outweigh](#) any interest in mainland business opportunities, but with Beijing banking so heavily on the future in this manner, a military assault seems far less likely. And that's something you won't hear these days in an ever more belligerent Washington.

Considering the Alternatives

It's difficult for outsiders — let alone most Chinese — to know what goes on in Beijing's closed-door CCP leadership councils and, of all state secrets, that leadership's calculations about a possible invasion of Taiwan are probably the most guarded. It's certainly possible, in other words, that Xi and his top lieutenants are prepared to invade at the earliest sign of a drive towards independence by Taiwan's leaders, as many U.S. officials claim. But there's no evidence in the public realm to sustain such an assessment and all practical military analysis suggests that such an endeavor would prove suicidal. In other words — though you'd never know it in today's frenzied Washington environment — concluding that an invasion is *not* likely under current circumstances is all too reasonable.

In the belief that Beijing is prepared to mount an invasion, the United States is already providing Taiwan with [billions of dollars](#)' worth of advanced weaponry, while [bolstering](#) its own capacity to defeat China in any potential conflict. Sadly, such planning for a future Pacific war is likely to consume an ever-increasing share of taxpayer dollars, result in ever more military [training](#) and [planning](#) in the Pacific, and as Rep. Gallagher and Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy [suggested recently](#), ever more belligerent attitudes toward China. Given the reasonable probability that Chinese leaders have decided against an invasion, at least in the immediate future, doesn't it make sense to consider alternative policies that will cost all of us less and make all of us safer?

Imagine, in fact, adopting a less antagonistic stance towards Beijing and seeking negotiated solutions to some of the issues dividing us, including China's militarization of contested islands in the South China Sea and its [provocative air and sea maneuvers](#) around Taiwan. Reduced tensions in the Western Pacific might, in turn, make it possible to avoid massive increases in the Pentagon budget, thereby permitting increased spending on domestic priorities like health, education, and climate action.

If only...

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