DEFENSE & SECURITY

Could China Occupy Taiwan Soon?

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Taiwan, officially the Republic of China, is an island country that has been independent from the People's Republic of China since 1949 and is a sui generis political entity. It is not a sovereign state based on the standards of the UN. Although many countries maintain bilateral relations with Taiwan, they do not officially recognize it as a sovereign state — the United States is one of them. The United States conducts its relations with Taiwan through its domestic laws, with the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) providing a unilateral security commitment to Taiwan. The United States, which improved its relations with the People's Republic of China in the 1970s, has since followed a policy defined as strategic ambiguity, maintaining relations while stating that it adheres to the One China policy. On the other hand, Beijing sees the island as an integral part of its territory. Moreover, as emphasized in the Defense White Paper published in 2019, Beijing considers Taiwan's independence as its first red line which must not be crossed. Beijing insists that sooner or later the island will unite with the mainland and that it will not hesitate to achieve this goal by force if necessary.

The two important factors that prevent China from invading Taiwan are the United States and the Taiwan Strait, which separates the island republic from its larger neighbor. This is why China has embarked on the largest and fastest naval buildups the world has ever witnessed in recent decades. Although Taiwan's military capabilities should not be ignored, it is negligible in the face of China's massive military capabilities. This is where the United States enters the equation. The security commitment provided by the United States was and remains the most important factor preventing possible Chinese invasion. The United States still has the most competent military force and navy in the world and maintains approximately 70% of its navy permanently in the Indo-Pacific region. It's not just US military deterrence that keeps China from invading Taiwan. A possible invasion will also weaken China's position in the region and

hinder its economic development, which could undermine its great power status today in the world. Moreover, such initiative could cause irreparable damage to China's relations with its economic partners, especially with European states.

Tensions between China and Taiwan have steadily increased since Tsai Ing-wen was elected President of Taiwan in 2016. Tsai abandoned his predecessor Ma Ying-jeou's approach to improving relations between the two countries. Meanwhile, Beijing has taken increasingly aggressive actions, including flying warplanes around the island. At this point, the question of whether the increasing military power of the People's Republic of China will lead it to invade Taiwan becomes essential. Chinese leaders do not hesitate to express that this will happen sooner or later at every opportunity.

So, could China soon invade Taiwan by taking advantage of the changes in the geopolitical landscape that occurred after the Russia-Ukraine war?

The U.S. has long pursued a policy of strategic ambiguity with respect to Taiwan. The United States has consistently stated that the U.S. would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion and prefer a more stable region. The United States and other countries have often looked to Taiwan as a model for economic development and democratization.

During the Chinese Civil War, the US had chosen not to support the nationalists directly but provided some military and economic assistance to the Nationalist government during war. Even though it had the opportunity to do so, the United States did not invade Taiwan, nor did it allow China or Soviet Russia to occupy the island. For the United States, Taiwan is an important example of an alternative China that can influence mainland Chinese on the opposite shore of communist China.

China, avoiding an early conflict with the U.S., is reluctant to make a decisive move on Taiwan. Moreover, the U.S. superiority over China in terms of air and missile systems is another point that should be taken into consideration. If China attacks Taiwan, the war will escalate and drag to other parts of East Asia. Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated on December 1, 2021, that "Japan and the United States cannot accept an attack by China on Taiwan and Beijing should understand this," which also confirms this assertion.

China is a major player in the Asia-Pacific region and has made significant investments in its military capabilities, including its navy. Historically, China has stood out as a land power, apart from the activities of the admiral Zheng He in the early 15th century in the oceans. However, especially since the 2000s, China's investments in its navy began to bear fruit, and it embarked on one of the most remarkable navy-building efforts in world history. China is building at least 20 warships a year in 17 shipyards and is expanding its naval fleet at a rate the United States is not matching and does not yet have the financial resources to compete with It is possible to point out that China's navy, which is about to make its third aircraft carrier operational within a decade of commissioning its first carrier, is its most important leverage in the region. It is seen that in the medium term, China will have a blue water navy and achieve the ability to conduct naval operations not only in the near seas but also all over the world.

The U.S. has encircled China from the north and surrounded it with a line we can call a sea wall, consisting of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, restricting China's access to the Indian Ocean. In return, China, which has a firm grip on Manchuria, keeps North Korea on its side and claims Taiwan as its territory. To counter the United States' formidable power projection in East Asia, Beijing has invested in a strategy of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD), which uses its geographic proximity to Taiwan to build up an integrated network of air and missile defense systems to prevent US aircraft and carrier groups from freely operating in the region. China seeks dominance in the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea to circumvent the "sea wall." Thus, it attaches particular importance to its nuclear submarine fleet. Therefore, China might have plans to extend the confrontation to the entire Pacific using its nuclear submarines, just as the Germans extended the war to the Atlantic using submarines during World War II.

As a response, the U.S. has undertaken a strategic countermove with the AUKUS pact. On September 15, 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that the three governments had agreed on a security pact called AUKUS. The aim of the security arrangement is widely understood to be containing China's growing encroachment on the region. It comes on the heels of deteriorating trade and diplomatic relations between China and Australia in which Beijing has shown little

restraint in using retaliatory measures. Despite its economic interdependence with China, Australia is seeking security guarantees from the United States. On the other hand, there is a lot of speculation about why the UK decided to strike a pacific security pact with the US and Australia.

The first reason is undoubtedly about making a reality of post-Brexit and doing more in the Indo-Pacific – something the UK promised it would do after Brexit. Second, it is about working closely with its allies. Third, it is about developing joint technologies across the UK, US, and Australia to protect undersea cables by using artificial intelligence and quantum communications. The most striking article of the agreement, which provides for the integration of the defense industries of the three countries, is Australia's future acquisition of submarines that use nuclear reactors. According to this agreement, Australia will have 8 SSBNs (submarines capable of launching ballistic missiles). In this case, the distribution of SSBNs among countries will be as follows: U.S. 14, Russian Federation 11, PRC 6, U.K. 4, France 4, and India 1. Australia's possession of 8 submarines of this type will tip the balance in the Pacific. Instead of struggling with China alone, the U.S. is taking a joint combat approach with Australia.

The United States is implementing initiatives against China, not only with the states in the region but also with its current allies. In this regard, the New Strategic Concept NATO, adopted at the NATO summit in Madrid on June 28-30, 2022, defines China as an actor that challenges the rules-based international system. For the U.S., defining China as a security risk in the NATO document is a significant win for the rules-based system. We can say that the U.S. has won the support of NATO in its great power competition with China. Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, and Australia also participated in this year's NATO summit. Coalitions and partnerships with these countries through NATO can further increase the United States' effectiveness against China in the Indo-Pacific region.

The United States wants to balance Chinese influence in the region, and Taiwan's independence is vital for the United States' efforts to achieve this goal. China has an economy interconnected with the world. Therefore, if sanctions similar to those imposed on Russia in response to an attempt to invade Ukraine are applied to China, the consequences could be

much more devastating for a more dependent Chinese. Of course, economic interdependence goes both ways, and members of the US coalition may be unwilling to bear the economic cost of containing China. Secondly, China needs to produce and sell to grow its economy, whose performance is crucial to the ruling Communist Party's legitimacy. This is one of the key elements of China's strategy. With recent housing shocks in China's fragile financial sector and a new wave of COVID-19 infections possibly slowing down the economy, the Chinese leadership will be especially reluctant to take large risks despite their efforts to secure supply chains. It is unlikely that China will be able to match the United States militarily in the short run.

As for the conditions, Chinese intervention in the near future is not feasible because any military option against Taiwan will cause more damage to China, provided the United States and its allies are willing to stand up to international aggressors.

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