

Will a Taiwan Emergency Happen? Analyzing the Challenges Facing China

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There is talk that war could break out across the Taiwan Strait. The US-Japan Joint Statement, issued at the summit meeting between Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and President Joe Biden in Washington in April 2021, referred to the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. This was the first time since 1969 when Prime Minister Eisaku Sato met with President Richard Nixon that the phrase had been mentioned at a US-Japan summit.

Are military tensions around the Taiwan Strait really rising? Will war break out across the Taiwan Strait? In short, will China use force against Taiwan? Or will the use of force be avoided even if tensions rise? Let's consider the question from the perspective of the challenges that China, which would be the party initiating the use of force, would face.

Long-Term Difficulties of Unification by Force

First of all, the probability of the use of force against Taiwan by China for the purpose of unification (military unification) is extremely low for the time being. China lacks the ability to do that, and it's hard to think it could be achieved in the next decade or so. Any war is a victory if it achieves a goal, but if it cannot be achieved, even if the battles are won, it is defeat. For China, the purpose of a war against Taiwan's armed forces would be to fully occupy a heavily armed island more than 100 kilometers away, establish a new government, and maintain its rule for a long time.

In order to achieve this, China would have to successfully attack satellites in outer space, conduct cyberattacks, attack with ballistic missiles, secure air and maritime dominance, conduct land invasion operations, and supply its large forces that land without interruption. At any stage, even if a landing operation is successful, if the US military intervenes and the supply lines are interrupted, the troops that landed would be cut off and annihilated. Moreover, Taiwanese forces would naturally fight back and could even take the war to mainland China. No matter how strong China is in certain areas, such as cyberspace, it cannot realize the occupation of Taiwan. China will not achieve its war objectives as long as Taiwan defends itself. Taiwan does not have to beat China – it will win if it does not lose. In this way, any operation to fully occupy Taiwan would be too costly and risky, and extremely difficult for China to undertake.

Moreover, it would escalate into a large-scale war for as long as Taiwan resists. In addition, if the United States and China entered into conflict in earnest, unless the US mainland was hit by nuclear

weapons, China would become a battlefield and suffer damage. Any operation by China to seize Taiwan by force would be a head-on challenge to the post-World War II international order largely created by the US. The US would have the military option of inflicting more damage on China than it could stand, in the short term at least.

How would China respond to any such military attacks by the US? Would it overcome the temptation to use nuclear weapons? But if China showed even a slight readiness to launch a preemptive nuclear attack on the US, the US should not hesitate to launch a first such strike on China. In other words, a war against Taiwan is a war that might never end and would be easy to escalate. So in what circumstances would China make the decision to launch a war in which it may fail to occupy Taiwan, lose its opportunities for development, and escalate the conflict to a possible nuclear exchange that could lead to the destruction of humanity?

It is likely only if the Chinese leadership makes serious and unusual miscalculations. Moreover, any such war would take several months to prepare and surprise attacks would be difficult. Taiwan, the US, Japan, and other nations will know in advance if China plans to embark on this great war, and the Chinese attack would begin in a situation where Taiwan is most strongly defended. Yet China would not have won unless it completed a full occupation of the island.

For this reason, we can conclude that the likelihood of China choosing to use armed force for unification is extremely low for the time being.

China's Fundamental Contradictions

It is easier to understand this issue from the point of view of China itself. Its plan to attack Taiwan has huge contradictions. As mentioned, US intervention is what it fears most. China has the ability to occupy Taiwan by force unless the US intervenes. But if China attacks Taiwan only to occupy it, US forces in Japan such as in Okinawa immediately next door would not be attacked or harmed. Nonetheless, the US might choose to intervene by easily using such unharmed forces in a Taiwan emergency. With any such military intervention by the US, China's attempt at unification by military means will be difficult. Even if the possibility of such US military intervention is insignificant, China cannot simply neglect that possibility.

That's why China is taking a purely military perspective and would launch operations to attack US bases in Japan from the beginning of the Taiwan attack operation. And as an attack on US military bases in

Japan is also an attack on Japan itself, Japan's Self-Defense Forces will also counterattack. If Japan and the US are attacked, the probability of a US counterattack and intervention in the Taiwan emergency is 100%. In other words, whether China attacks only Taiwan or attacks the US bases in Japan first, it has no choice but to act on the assumption of 100% US military intervention.

How does China resolve this contradiction? By having the Chinese army build the ability to annihilate US forces including those in Japan, South Korea, Guam, and Hawaii in battle and making the time necessary for the Taiwan occupation, as well as by increasing its nuclear capabilities, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), China will build a situation in which the US could never confidently intervene. China's military build-up is clearly moving in this direction. By the middle of the 21st century, China's goal is to compete with the US as the world's leading military.

The question is whether the US, Japan, and Taiwan will allow China to take more than 20 years to bring about this situation. If they do, the capabilities of the US and China will eventually be reversed. If they do not tolerate this and continue to maintain the current gaps in capabilities, the status quo will be maintained for a longer period of time. At a time when China's medium- to long-term trend is almost fixed, the current state of the Taiwan Strait depends on what decisions the US, Japan, and Taiwan make and implement to maintain the status quo.

Occupation of Remote Islands in the South China Sea

Next, let's consider the probability that China will use limited force which is unlikely to be counteracted by the US. Such limited use of force can be divided into several cases. The targets of the attack are (A) remote islands in the South China Sea, (B) remote islands along the Fujian coast, (C) the Pescadores which are effectively controlled by Taiwan, (D) the main island of Taiwan, divided into four parts.

(A) is the Pratas Islands (Dongsha Islands) controlled by Taiwan and Itu Abba island in the Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands) that Taiwan also has effective control over. Since 2020, China has been flying military aircraft along a route connecting Taiwan and the Pratas Islands. Most cases of Chinese military aircraft entering Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) go along this course. If Chinese forces attacked and occupied the Pratas Islands and Itu Abba, Taiwan would have almost no way to stop them. These remote islands are out of the range of Taiwan's main weapons. Also, even if Taiwan dispatches military aircraft and ships, it must engage the Chinese army in an area where China has secured air and maritime dominance. Where Taiwan fights back, China should be able to easily overcome it.

Moreover, there is no responsibility for the US to intervene on the Taiwanese side with regard to remote islands in the South China Sea. These islands are not in the realm of "Taiwan of historical meaning" and are not under the scope of the Taiwan Relations Act. So at first glance, China appears to be able to carry out a "perfect war" there that eliminates Taiwanese forces and completely occupy these remote islands.

However, what China would lose is great. Simply put, by taking the "outposts" of remote islands, there is a greater possibility that it would not be able to occupy Taiwan, its principal target. For example, hundreds of Taiwanese troops are deployed in the Pratas Islands. If they die in war or become prisoners of war, they will strengthen the anti-China feelings and resistance of Taiwan residents. Also, China has no control over how much the Taiwanese army will fight back, and even a small attack on mainland China could lead to a gradual escalation as it would force a counterattack.

In addition, with China's moves to change territorial boardelines in the South China Sea by using force, Vietnam and the Philippines, both of which have territorial disputes with China, and Japan, which is under pressure from China over the issue of the Senkaku Islands, should feel a sense of crisis about China's actions and strengthen countermeasures against them. The sense of crisis in the US, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and other countries that are wary of China's claim of the Nine Dash Line in the South China Sea and the establishment of a military base would also rise rapidly. The US would strengthen its support for Taiwan. In other words, the capture of Taiwan's main island, which is China's principal goal, would be difficult to be realized by the occupation of these small islands in the South China Sea.

The Occupation of Kinmen & Matsu

(B) is Kinmen Island and the Matsu Islands, a group of islets on the coast of Fujian Province. However, there is not much that China will gain from occupying these islands. These are parts of Fujian Province, where exchanges with mainland China are thriving and relations are good, while many residents are also opposed to Taiwan's independence and dislike the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government. What merit would there be for China if it kills them through use of force? Also, China does not rush to take territory that it could take at any time. Hong Kong is a good example. China tends to choose escalation only when it is inferior.

In addition, both Kinmen and Matsu have Taiwanese forces deployed there, and they might counterattack by hitting Xiamen and Fuzhou on the other side. China has no control over the actions of the Taiwanese army, and even if China were to win Kinmen Island, if Fuzhou and Xiamen were exposed to war and damage, the Chinese government would have difficulty proclaiming "victory" to the people.

However, since Kinmen and Matsu are also not in the realm of "Taiwan", they are not an area applicable to the Taiwan Relations Act. The US has no responsibility to defend them. Having said that, the US may not necessarily intervene 100%. When China launched a massive shelling of Kinmen Island in 1958, the US intervened by sending a large number of aircraft carriers. These islands were not part of the US-China Mutual Defense Treaty at the time, but the US dispatched troops to Taiwan. So it cannot ultimately be denied that an attack on Kinmen could lead to US intervention.

Limited Use of Force Against the Pescadores & Taiwan

(C) is the Pescadores (or Penghu Islands) that have historically been part of Taiwan and are within range of missiles of the Taiwanese military. Taiwan will do its utmost to protect the Pescadores and even if they are temporarily taken, Taiwan will surely try to get them back. In the case of the Pescadores there could be sufficient intervention by US forces under the Taiwan Relations Act. In other words, attacking the Pescadores would be almost synonymous with attacking Taiwan's main island.

(D) The same is true in cases where a limited attack is launched on the main island of Taiwan. China can use ballistic missiles to surprise and destroy Taiwan's military facilities and political and economic centers at any time. But for what purpose it would do this is a big question. As Taiwan's forces fight back, if China stops attacking at some point, Taiwan would proclaim to the world that China's attempt at unification by force has failed. With this, the Chinese government will lose face. In other words, as I pointed out earlier, Taiwan wins if it is not occupied, and if it does not lose, it wins.

In addition, attacks on (C) and (D) are the most likely to prompt US forces to intervene. If China withdrew after attacking Taiwan because the US military and self-defense forces intervened, the Communist Party's government would collapse. In these cases also, it is possible that China would become a battlefield due to Taiwan's counterattacks. Maritime transportation routes in the South China Sea and around Taiwan, which have supported China's economic development, would also be seriously affected. In other words, attacks on (C) and (D) undermine China's development strategy from the ground up. China would have to be prepared for enormous damage, even in the case of a limited attack on the main island of Taiwan, and if it adhered to using only conventional weapons, the US mainland would remain intact.

Moreover, in the short term, in addition to the above-mentioned profit and loss calculations, there are circumstances in China that prevent it from launching armed attacks in terms of timing. This is because the 20th Party Congress scheduled for autumn 2022 will determine whether President Xi Jinping will serve a third term, and until this is ensured no mistakes would be allowed by the Xi administration.

Military Provocation Type of Use of Force That Is Likely in the Short Term

So it is not a question of whether the use of force is impossible. For example, if China "subjectively recognizes" that Taiwan and the US have "provoked it beyond the limits of patience", the probability of using force increases. Such provocation might come about if Taiwan clearly moved to de jure independence and if the US recognized Taiwan as a state, or sent a large US military force to Taiwan, or if the US president visited Taiwan. With such provocations, the Chinese Communist government would believe that unless it demonstrated its strong will by military force its regime would collapse. In this case, the probability of China's using force would increase at a stretch.

However, it would be a limited symbolic use of force because it would simply be to demonstrate a "strong will". In other words, it would be a "military provocation type" use of force that does not actually change borderlines of territory or cause Taiwanese casualties, and would stop immediately after implementation and end without any counterattacks by the other parties. For example, there could be countless scenarios, such as firing ballistic missiles onto a high summit in Taiwan where no one lives. The purpose would be to warn the US and prevent a US-Taiwan approach. China could avoid a political crisis by claiming it had won a major victory, and that Taiwan and the US had been afraid, after carrying out such a provocation.

Since the end of the 1950s, China's use of force on issues of sovereignty and territory has often been symbolic and limited, with the exception of the 1974 Naval Battle of the Paracel Islands, in which it actually captured the territory that the opponent was defending. In many cases, when China has recognized that it has become extremely disadvantaged, it has used limited symbolic force to break the situation at once, and immediately withdrawn and propagated a victory. The possibility of such a "military provocative use of force" is far from low and could happen at any time.

"Coercive Peaceful Unification"

Because Xi has won three elections, Taiwan, the US and Japan should pay attention to the medium- to long-term possibility of "peaceful unification by coercive measures". This is unlike the "peaceful unification through discussions with the Taiwanese authorities" that Deng Xiaoping originally envisioned. It assumes that Taiwan is isolated and its armed forces surrender without fighting. Although the possibility of the Xi administration moving to pursue unification by force is small, in 10 or 20 years China should have even greater military power to achieve this.

In order not to make China think it can do so, it is essential to continue to meet the following three conditions at the same time. These are the three conditions for maintaining the status quo. First, the US does not abandon Taiwan; second, the US-Japan alliance remains strong; and third, Taiwan maintains the threat of force. Even if one of these factors is missing, China will remain afraid of miscalculation.

What we should primarily fear is the limited use of force of military provocation types in the short term and peaceful unification by coercive measures in the long run. In particular, the latter means that the era of peace and development in the region under US hegemony ends, and China's hegemony will be established. Therefore, the answers that I offer to the question "Will a Taiwan emergency happen?" are not necessarily good news, but rather represent a more serious situation. We are in the midst of long-term strategic competition between the US and China, and if we do not respond properly, tragedy awaits. **JS**

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