

The Strategic Duel over Taiwan

by Ian Easton

The United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are firmly entrenched in what will be a long and intense strategic competition for dominance over the Pacific Rim. American strategists Andrew Marshall, Robert Kaplan, and Aaron Friedberg began foretelling of this great power struggle over a decade ago.¹ They recognized before anyone else that there are strong forces underpinning the U.S.-China rivalry. The two countries' political systems and national interests stand in fundamental opposition. This is why, despite Washington's reluctance to officially admit it, strategic competition between the U.S. and the PRC is unavoidable.

The United States, while an imperfect democracy, is an inspiration to people everywhere who yearn for the freedom and dignity that comes from having a representative government, independent legal system, and market economy. In the PRC, on the other hand, power is monopolized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a political organization that is directly responsible for more human suffering than possibly any other regime past or present, anywhere in the world.² Numerous State Department reports detail the past and continuing human rights violations occurring under the watch of the CCP.³

For all its much ballyhooed economic reforms, China's economy is still largely controlled by massive state-owned corporations, making it a mercantilist country, not a capitalist one.⁴ Much of Beijing's economic power ultimately stems from its remarkable ability to lure foreign business elites with promises of access to its huge market. Once the hook is set, China pockets their investments, steals their intellectual property, and undercuts their market competitiveness.⁵

Yet it is not the PRC's unsavory political or economic practices that will ensure sustained U.S.-China competition over the coming decades, although future American presidents, like Barack Obama, will undoubtedly be tempted to paper over ideological differences for expedience sake. Rather, Beijing's insecure and aggressive nature is at the root of the problem. In recent years, China has stoked maritime tensions with Japan and the Philippines, both treaty allies of the United States; provoked border clashes with India, a democratic nation and American security partner; and enabled nuclear missile proliferation amongst its

friends: North Korea, Pakistan, and Iran.⁶ Track records tell a compelling story. The PRC's track record indicates that a growing number of geostrategic issues could eventually result in a clash between the United States and China.

Future Flashpoint

Of all the geostrategic powder kegs out there, the potential for a war over Taiwan is the largest and most explosive. Beijing has made clear that its main external military objective is attaining the ability to apply overwhelming force against Taiwan during a war, and in a manner that would keep American-led coalition forces from intervening.⁷ Chinese military strategists obsess over Taiwan because their communist party masters are deeply insecure. Beijing views Taiwan, which exists as a free and independent state known officially as the Republic of China, as a grave threat to its totalitarian grip on domestic political power.⁸ Taiwan is dangerous to Beijing because it serves as a beacon of freedom for Chinese-speaking people everywhere.⁹ Consequently, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) considers the invasion of Taiwan to be its top planning priority. It is this envisioned war that drives PLA modernization.¹⁰

Understanding a Taiwan scenario first requires some myth-busting. It has become conventional wisdom that Taiwan will eventually be pulled into China's orbit by cross-strait trade and other economic entanglements.¹¹ This view, however, is disconnected from the reality on the ground in Taiwan. The Taiwanese are fiercely protective of their hard-won freedoms and rightfully proud of their democracy. They are no more willing to compromise their territorial sovereignty for the sake of economic benefits than the Japanese or Australians. In spite of the power disparity that exists--Taiwan has a population of 23 million to China's 1.3 billion--Taipei's close defense ties with Washington means that it does not have to bow to coercion from Beijing, economic or otherwise.¹²

Another popular myth is that the U.S. will sell Taiwan out.¹³ American commitment to Taiwan though is enshrined in U.S. Law 96-8, the Taiwan Relations Act.¹⁴ This legal instrument is founded on calculations of national interests. Every professional

American strategist since Admiral Chester Nimitz and General Douglas MacArthur has recognized that Taiwan is a center of gravity in the Asia-Pacific.¹⁵ The island sits astride the world's busiest maritime and air superhighways, right in the middle of the first island chain, a defensive barrier for keeping Chinese power projection in check.¹⁶ While America does not need Taiwan as a base for its troops, planes, or ships, it is strategically interested in the island remaining in the hands of a friendly government. For this reason, any PRC attempt to gain control of Taiwan would almost certainly be regarded as an attack on the vital interests of the United States, and therefore repelled by any means necessary, including military force.

The question of how the U.S. can best deter Chinese aggression against Taiwan will be hotly contested in the years ahead. Peace and prosperity in Asia and beyond are riding on the ability of the United States to get this problem right. Some scholars have entertained notions of abandoning Taiwan, trading it away for other ends as if it were a stack of poker chips and not a democratic country.¹⁷ Policymakers in Washington, however, should ignore those views, because the dispute between China and Taiwan cannot be separated from the larger geopolitics of the region. Taiwan is critical not only for its location, but also because of its shared values with the United States.¹⁸ Historical experience shows time and time again that nations that share democratic values are the best partners and worth defending. Common values generate common interests, which are the basis for making a common cause in addressing global challenges.

Imbalance, Rebalance, Quagmire, and Elections

When it comes to strategic interaction with China, the United States has suffered from a lack of clarity, unsure of what is needed to compete effectively with China or whether the competition even exists in the first place. Since the early 1970s, many American foreign policy elites have taken the strategic importance of the PRC for granted and asserted that Washington needs Beijing's cooperation, first geostrategically as a counterweight to the Soviet Union, then economically for market access, and more recently diplomatically as a partner on global issues ranging from North Korea to the Taliban and from piracy to climate change. This view is especially pronounced among those who embrace the notion that America is in decline and that China is going to prevail over the long run. From their perspective, the best the U.S. can do is make a grand bargain that would limit China's ascendancy to its own sphere of interest.¹⁹ American policymakers, influenced by these defeatist views, have often gone to great lengths to accommodate China's communist leadership. This tendency to overvalue the strategic importance of maintaining warm U.S.-PRC relations is something that unnecessarily weakens Washington's bargaining power with Beijing, and ultimately undermines efforts to formulate long-term strategy.

America's relatively sanguine approach to China's emergence as a strategic competitor is increasingly difficult to reconcile with

events. Over the past decade, the PRC has provided Washington several indicators that trouble is lurking ahead. However, each of them has been minimized or ignored in the name of positive Sino-U.S. relations. The first wake-up call came on January 11, 2007, when China shot a ballistic missile into a target satellite in low earth orbit.²⁰ This missile test was followed by several others which as a whole clearly demonstrate Beijing's intention to weaponize space and neutralize the eyes and ears of U.S. military power in a conflict.²¹ Another warning came in 2010, when China deployed the world's first anti-ship ballistic missile, a weapon specifically designed to sink aircraft carriers, the queens of America's fleet.²² Many other unsettling developments, both diplomatic and military, followed over the course of the following five years.²³

Even in the face of these events, some scholars have clung to the false hope that mutual economic interdependence, military-to-military exchanges, and favorable diplomatic treatment will build trust and socialize China internationally, enticing it into becoming a responsible stakeholder. They often emphasize the risks of inadvertent conflict and escalation control if their policy prescriptions are not followed. Yet none of these factors have dulled China's competitive instincts. If anything, they have only served to heighten them.²⁴

Recognizing the looming storm ahead, Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia under Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, spearheaded the strategy of rebalancing American attention to Asia in the early years of the Obama Administration.²⁵ America's allies in Asia warmly welcomed the rebalance, or "pivot" as it became known. As part of the effort, the Pentagon established a new Air-Sea Battle office, which generated much excitement among those who recognized fresh operational concepts were needed for dealing with China's military threat.²⁶ However, when Campbell stepped down in early 2013, things began to unravel. White House leadership, characterized by a strong focus on domestic issues, the Middle East, and climate change, quickly allowed the much-anticipated rebalance to quagmire.²⁷

This inattention exacted a heavy toll in 2015 when several major events occurred which adversely affected U.S. strategic interests. The PRC systematically created a massive archipelago of artificial island bases in the South China Sea, claiming the entire area as a virtual province of China. This disrupted ongoing attempts to apply international legal mechanisms, like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, to settle disputes and greatly weakened the defensive positions of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam.²⁸ Next, it was revealed that Chinese intelligence agents had penetrated American systems and compromised the identities (including fingerprints) of over twenty million Americans who worked for the federal government.²⁹ Not long afterwards, China held a military parade in Beijing where the military rolled out a new intermediate range ballistic missile that could be used against the U.S. territory of Guam—a strategic hub in the Western Pacific.³⁰

Confidence in American leadership has declined among democratic allies across the Asia-Pacific as the result of Beijing's actions and Washington's inactions. The resultant power vacuum in the Pacific has hit Taiwan especially hard; it has no other security partners to turn to for help, and its threat-environment is the most stressing. Taiwanese officials now frequently complain about Washington's unwillingness to sell them new fighters, tanks, drones, and destroyers. Even submarine technology, promised by President George W. Bush in 2001, has proven out of reach for Taipei. The current White House, deeply fearful of rousing Beijing's ire, has instead offered Taiwan second-rate equipment, of the type provided to Mexico.³¹ Adding insult to injury, U.S. Navy ships now make port calls up and down the PRC coast, sailing past Taiwan at full steam as if it were somehow a dreadful pariah state, not a friendly democracy.³²

The landslide results of the recent presidential and legislative elections in Taipei are telling. The citizens of Taiwan chose Dr. Tsai-Ing-wen, whose political party and its supporters are widely viewed as tough on China and friendly to the United States—and therefore more likely to secure a better future relationship with Washington.³³ At the same time, they also chose a policy platform that calls for a more robust indigenous defense industry as a pragmatic hedge against continued American paralysis.³⁴ Taiwan wants to arm itself and has resolved to do so whether its “big brother” helps or not. This can-do attitude means that the small island democracy, largely ignored for the past decade, will soon be at the front of American geostrategic thinking. If the contest of the century is to be waged between the U.S. and PRC for primacy in the Pacific, then Taiwan will assuredly be at the center of the action.

Conclusion

All indications suggest that China is striving for military superiority over the United States in the Pacific, and especially in a Taiwan invasion scenario. Beijing's communist government sees its future aspirations as fundamentally incompatible with an American-led global order. The U.S. and PRC are engaged in a strategic standoff that will likely define the decades ahead. Those denying this are simply failing to be skeptical enough, or too satisfied with information—often crafted in Beijing—that conforms to their preconceptions. They are simply not giving enough weight to what Chinese leaders are actually saying, writing, and doing.

The next American president will therefore come into office during a period of shifting global power, which, if the trend is not arrested, will be increasingly adverse to American interests. Without a course correction, the U.S. and other Pacific democracies will find themselves confronted by an adversary who does not share their most fundamental beliefs and who will soon be able to threaten much of region and beyond. Much more can and should be done by America and allies to convince the PRC that a war in the Taiwan Strait—or anywhere else—would be fruitless and financially crippling. This will only be possible with

stronger and smarter American leadership.

Mr. Ian Easton is as a research fellow at the Project 2049 Institute, where he conducts research on defense and security issues in Asia. Mr. Easton previously served as a 2013 visiting fellow at the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA) in Tokyo and worked for two years as a China analyst at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA).

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