

Would China Really Invade Taiwan? Maybe, But the Costs Would Be Nuts

While Beijing may like to seize Taiwan by any means, it may not actually think the costs of doing so are worth it.

Are the United States and China truly on the brink of war over Taiwan? Or could

one simply observe that there appears to be a never-ending measure of escalation with verbal exchanges, military drills and exercises, and geopolitical posturing?

A 2005 Chinese Anti-Secession law gives the Chinese government authority to use force to reunify with Taiwan should the “breakaway” province formally declare its independence. Given that the island of Taiwan is, at the moment, basically autonomous and independent from China, there is little value in actually declaring independence.

Yet the Chinese military has been flying fighter jets over the Western coastline of the island of Taiwan, conducting amphibious assault warfare preparations and sending its new carriers quite close to the area. All of this is against the backdrop of Chinese-government-backed newspapers writing visibly about war-readiness to take over Taiwan.

Is there a realistic possibility that China could succeed in any takeover of Taiwan? Maybe, in part due to a combination of operational speed and the prospect of U.S. restraint. Could China be successful in an attempt to quickly overwhelm Taiwanese defenses before U.S. forces could respond? If that happened, could Beijing, therefore, manage to secure the island before a large counterattack was possible? This seems unlikely, given the sustained U.S. presence in the region and forward positioning of strike assets nearby.

Fighter jets, bombers, nearby carrier strike groups, along with U.S. provided long-range defensive weapons on the island of Taiwan make it likely that any invasion might be repelled or prolonged enough to enable U.S. intervention. Also, while Taiwan is not far from the Chinese mainland, large numbers of U.S. surveillance assets, not to mention satellites, keep a constant bird-eye watch upon Chinese maneuvers. Any war preparations, large-scale force deployments or initial transit toward Taiwan would likely be seen immediately by U.S. surveillance. There could always be a surprise attack with something like a long-range missile, but it seems unlikely that any kind of large-scale invasion could succeed before the United States would have a chance to intervene. This reality likely dashes a potential Chinese hope that it might be able to quickly secure Taiwan and lead the United States to hold back and basically allow Beijing to avoid a catastrophic full-scale war.

Meanwhile, the United States has in a comparable way, massively up-ticked its

own exercises in the region with a dramatic increase in drone surveillance missions, bomber patrols, and Carrier Strike Group exercises. America has also carried out dual-carrier power projection warfare preparation operations in the vicinity of Taiwan. In addition, the U.S. Navy has for years conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations throughout disputed regions of the South China Sea to, at least in part, challenged China's provocative territorial claims and phony island-building in the area. These included pointed and quite deliberate efforts to sail within the so-called disputed twelve-mile territorial boundary near islands erroneously claimed by China.

While there has been serious concern about miscalculations, misunderstanding and possible unintended military confrontations or even an exchange of fire, neither side is likely to give a "go-ahead" for any kind of first strike. U.S. and Chinese ships have sailed quite close to one another, U.S. bomber patrols have specifically flown quite close to being directly overhead Chinese targets and Chinese fighters have actually flown "over" coastal areas along the Taiwanese border.

However, there seems to be a never-ending series of provocations and warnings, including bold statements from the Chinese that they are specifically well-positioned to destroy what their government calls "foreign interventions" into a possible conflict with Taiwan. Meanwhile, the risks and potential costs of war with the United States may simply be too high for China to actually initiative a military offensive against Taiwan. Conversely, while the United States clearly wants to challenge Chinese provocations and formally "deter" China from taking any kind of aggressive action, it seems clear that America is by no means likely to launch a first strike upon Chinese forces.

Does this make all of the Chinese provocations, war preparations, and public comments about its power projections somewhat useless and potentially even irrelevant? The answer may be yes.

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