Deterring Xi Jinping’s Taiwan Ambitions

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Precisely because a direct attack on Taiwan brings unacceptable risk to Beijing, Xi is therefore likely disposed to ramp up coercive actions that seek to demoralize the Taiwan people and, crucially, create scenarios where the U.S. commitment to Taiwan is clearly and publicly tested.

While it is certain that Chinese leader Xi Jinping seeks Taiwan’s de jure absorption or annexation into the People’s Republic of China (PRC), there remain vexing ambiguities and uncertainties about how he is seeking to achieve this goal, how much risk he is willing to accept, and what cost—diplomatic, economic, reputational, military—he is willing to absorb in the pursuit of his objectives.

While some analysts argue that Xi represents a clear break with Beijing’s long-standing approach to cross-strait issues, the evidence does not support this conclusion. Xi’s rhetoric on Taiwan is largely consistent with that of his predecessors in Beijing. Deng Xiaoping stated in 1983, “We shall complete the unfinished task of reunification left to us by our predecessors,” an early formulation of Xi’s later urging that the Taiwan issue should not “be passed down from generation to the next.” Deng’s immediate successor, Jiang Zemin, declared that “reunification” was China’s “sacred mission.” Hu Jintao oversaw the passage of the 2005 “anti-secession law,” which stipulated—albeit vaguely—the circumstances under which Beijing would use military force to compel “reunification.” The substance of Xi’s approach to cross-strait relations has also been largely consistent with the long-standing admixture of coercive cudgels and attempted economic inducements. Individuals and actors who adhere to Beijing’s “one China principle” are rewarded and favored, while those who push for Taiwan’s expanded autonomy and security are demonized and punished.

What has changed is the intensity of Beijing’s coercion and intimidation, and the expansion and increasing sophistication of the tool kit it can bring to bear. Where for much of the past 75 years, Chinese leaders were forced to contend with a vastly superior U.S. military, over the last two decades, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has undergone an unprecedented military modernization and buildup. While it may not yet be able to vie with the United States for its ability to project power globally, the capabilities it can now focus on the waters in and around the Taiwan Strait are extraordinary, to say nothing of the invest-
ments it is currently making in future capabilities that will further complicate U.S. calculations. Although the PLA is evolving to play a more global role, the core focus of its efforts remains on having the capability to seize Taiwan and repel a counter-invasion coalition led by the United States.

For Beijing, a credible threat of invasion remains the bedrock of its political deterrence strategy. Without it, Beijing fears that Taiwan would move rapidly toward de facto or de jure independence, expand diplomatic relations with international partners and its role in international institutions, and seek to forge an even stronger security relationship with the United States, Beijing’s chief rival. Ensuring that the PLA’s military threat is seen as credible therefore requires regular demonstrations of power and capability, from military exercises to calculated rhetorical pressure and warnings. Beijing also believes that Taipei and Washington (and increasingly third countries like Japan, Singapore, and the Philippines) must believe that Beijing has more “skin in the game” and is willing to risk more than anyone else to ensure Taiwan’s annexation. Thus, the recent uptick in what the U.S. Department of Defense calls “coercive and risky intercepts” of U.S. and allied aircraft by the PLA is not incidental or accidental but rather essential to a strategy of demonstrating that Beijing will go to war and risk everything to protect “territorial sovereignty.” Added to this military campaign is the significant political, informational, economic, and diplomatic pressure Beijing leverages in an attempt to deter the United States and third countries from strengthening relations with Taipei and, relatedly, convince the Taiwan people that they are isolated and alone.

Yet just because Beijing has a better tool kit doesn’t mean it has a better strategy. Indeed, in many ways, Beijing’s cross-strait approach stands at an inflection point. The policy of economic inducement pursued during the Ma Ying-jeou era (2008–2016) collapsed under the weight of domestic political opposition in the form of the Sunflower Movement. China’s continued and widespread use of economic coercion against Taiwan and a growing number of countries further undercuts Beijing’s faith in the efficacy of economic carrots. The full cutoff of relations with Taipei after the 2016 election of Tsai Ing-wen hasn’t yielded a Taiwan population that is more compliant with Beijing or more interested in “reunification.” In fact, the situation is quite the opposite, with polling data showing that fewer and fewer Taiwan people see a future in unification with the PRC. And Beijing’s campaign of repression in Hong Kong and its active support for Russia’s war on Ukraine have only strengthened Taiwan domestic solidarity against rule by Beijing.

When looking at unfolding events and dynamics in the Taiwan Strait, the United States faces a quandary. On the one hand, Chinese leaders likely still see a direct military assault on Taiwan, or a blockade of the waters around it, as prohibitively risky. Even while recognizing that events of the past several years have shattered the illusion that geopolitics is foreseeable, or that dictators follow a predictable straight line, in the absence of a significant deterioration in the U.S.-China relationship or some other exogenous change, the prospect of a Chinese invasion or blockade of Taiwan (an act of war under international law) remains low. As it stands, Xi Jinping is more conservative and cautious than his strategic ally, Vladimir Putin.

But precisely because a direct attack on Taiwan brings unacceptable risk to Beijing, Xi is therefore likely disposed to ramp up coercive actions that seek to demoralize the Taiwan people and, crucially, create scenarios where the U.S. commitment to Taiwan is clearly and publicly tested. Many such efforts will undoubtedly fail on their own terms, instead further galvanizing the Taiwan people and highlighting the importance of Taiwan to the international community. Yet others will undoubtedly succeed. Some will discourage international actors from taking a bolder stance on Taiwan’s security through the use of direct or indirect threats. Other actions will create or leverage domestic divisions within Taiwan. And, consequentially, Beijing will look for space to probe or outright challenge the United States’ long-standing commitment to Taiwan.

There are critical steps the United States can take to meet this challenge.

First, the discussion in Washington should be reoriented away from a narrow focus on still unlikely
scenarios, like an invasion or blockade, and instead focus on combating the daily campaign of political, economic, diplomatic, and military pressure that Beijing is directing toward Taipei. The more the United States makes the Taiwan issue strictly about invasions, the more hesitant medium and small powers will be to draw closer to Taiwan and support U.S. efforts in the region. Beijing won’t need to invade Taiwan if it can successfully isolate and intimidate the island. U.S. partners and allies should find their own ways to credibly signal to Beijing that it would pay a price (economically, diplomatically, and militarily) for disrupting peace in the Taiwan Strait. Signaling this cost will demand that countries be willing to accept some additional friction with Beijing, but unless and until Xi understands the isolation China would face as a result of aggression, conflict is more, not less, likely.

The United States should also dramatically step up its efforts to bring radical transparency to the PRC’s actions and behavior in the Taiwan Strait and throughout the South China Sea. The Department of Defense has recently taken steps to highlight the PLA’s growing belligerence in the air and at sea, and such efforts should widen to include not just military domains but also the diplomatic, economic, and political space. Beijing operates best in the shadows.

Finally, as the United States works to build Taiwan’s and its own defense capabilities, political rhetoric back in Washington is undermining the perceived credibility of its commitments. The Taiwan issue has exploded in importance over the past several years, with policymakers in both parties making public statements on a range of related issues. Some of these signal to Beijing that Taiwan’s prosperity and resiliency are supported by a strong bipartisan coalition, and thus, U.S. commitment will continue indefinitely. Yet other comments unintentionally reinforce Xi Jinping’s view that the United States is looking to pare down its global responsibilities, leading to a U.S. resolve that is weakening, wavering, or fundamentally retreating. Clear, consistent, and sensible comments and actions by policymakers and political leaders in support of Taiwan’s security and prosperity would be the best deterrent to future Chinese aggression.

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