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Who Do You Think You're Kidding?

Beijing and Taipei make war-like noises, but neither is ready for battle

WHAT IS PRESIDENT LEE TENG-HUI REALLY UP TO IN RE-defining Taiwan's relationship with China as "special state-to-state?" The United States, Taipei's only protector, would like to know. Some Americans believe that Lee, who didn't bother to consult Washington before speaking out, is trying to manipulate America toward a potential military conflict with China. According to this reasoning, Lee is gambling that if war breaks out and the U.S. and Taiwan are on the same side, the world would then recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state, giving it the status it craves: independence and a seat in the United Nations.

Lee's statement certainly exercised Beijing, which has threatened a punishing response. Newspapers in Hong Kong have run countless articles with headlines like BEIJING CAN TAKE TAIWAN IN DAYS CLAIMS P.R.C. MILITARY EXPERT. But while pictures of Chinese warplanes standing ready on runways and missiles being launched from warships make good television, the reality is that neither China nor Taiwan is in a good position to start a war. Therefore they should wisely avoid it.

The reasons are straightforward. China's economy isn't strong enough to sustain a prolonged skirmish. Its badly managed state-owned conglomerates continue to waste substantial national resources, but Beijing lacks the will to cut out the cancer. Systemic corruption drains the national coffers. The banking system is teetering near bankruptcy.

For all Beijing's bravado, there is no evidence that China could quickly subdue Taiwan. China's amphibious force is a crucial weak link in its military capability. A Normandy-type landing is simply not an option. The Russian Su-27 warplanes that Beijing is in the process of acquiring are untested, and the more advanced Su-30s are still on order. Raining missiles down on Taiwan, as Beijing has threatened, may indeed cause great damage. But air power, on its own, does not win wars. Even if the American 7th Fleet doesn't come to Taiwan's defense—an implausible if—China would be hard pressed to define "victory" in attacking Taiwan. What if Taiwan refuses to surrender? Would Beijing begin carpet-bombing to terrorize the civilian population, killing many in the process?

The fact is the island's 22 million citizens do not want to be reunited with the mainland as long as China remains a communist dictatorship. And the world should have learned from the Vietnam War that you cannot win the hearts and minds of a people by trying to bomb them into submission. The Soviets didn't—and paid the price in Afghanistan, where the disastrous invasion accelerated the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Even limited military aggression by China would be risky. Taking the Taiwanese islands of Quemoy and Matsu by force, for example, would not gain Beijing anything, militarily or strategically. Neither would the electronic warfare hinted at by Beijing military spokesmen.

If China were to use overwhelming force, it would accomplish the exact opposite of what it desires, and risk losing forever the loyalty some Taiwanese feel toward the motherland. And if China cannot subjugate Taiwan within days—which in all likelihood it cannot—then it will have lost the war on two fronts. First, it will have failed by its own standards (remember those newspaper headlines?), and second, world sympathy would rally behind Taiwan's desire to become independent. The bottom line is that attacking Taiwan is a very risky, lose-lose strategy for China.

Taiwan is not ready for war, either. Its principal source of weapons is the U.S. If Washington does not want war—and it surely does not—Taipei will be left with empty barrels. While Taiwan's military capability tends to be underestimated by some outsiders, its forces, too, are untested. The frequent F-16 accidents and serial civilian plane crashes suggest that Taiwan's pilots urgently need retraining. In short, military competence on both sides of the Strait is in serious doubt. War between China and Taiwan should be limited to simulation games in military academies.

If China wants Taiwan to opt for reunification it should accelerate its own move toward political and economic democracy. In the meantime, China's leaders would do well to re-read American history. All the wars the U.S. has fought since World War I were preceded by American reluctance to be involved. Once hostilities began, however, Washington resolutely sent its soldiers into harm's way, even when its own national interests were not clear, as in Vietnam. American blood has been shed for idealistic reasons that few other countries would be willing to fight for. Many aggressors, including Saddam Hussein, have misjudged the U.S. China should not. Washington may not officially recognize Taipei, but their societies share many basic values. It would be a rude awakening for China to find out, should it start a war with Taiwan, that America would come to Taipei's defense even at the price of discarding nascent strategic relations with Beijing.

So why did Lee do it? Quite apart from helping protégé Vice Premier Lien Chan win the upcoming presidential election, Lee was serving notice that cross-Strait relations, until now in a state of creative ambiguity, remain explosive and not merely a domestic affair. It behooves Beijing and Taipei not to blunder on this. They cannot and should not start a war that neither can finish. ■



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