Why China Will Not Unify with Taiwan by 2020 —and Beijing Lacks Compelling Military Options

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For China, the first of its two "centennial anniversaries"—in 2021 (100 years since the Chinese Communist Party's (CPP) founding) and 2049 (100 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China) —arrives in just four years. Although Beijing has publicly disavowed any timeline for unification with Taiwan, there is little question that CCP leaders would prefer the issue to be settled by then, or at least to oversee sufficient progress to justify its stewardship of the country's revitalization.

Although the two sides are more economically interdependent than ever, the prospects for "peaceful unification" continue to dim. China is fighting the trends that have everywhere favored the strengthening of subnational identities. The proliferation of digital technologies and social media, the inability of national governments to satisfy the proliferating demands of their peoples, and the increasing mobility of populations have weakened the loyalty claimed by national and supra-national governments and strengthened regional and ethnic identities. In China alone, Beijing struggles to maintain the loyalty of its people in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet.

In Taiwan, the pull of regional identity and declining popular identification with China has fueled the island's shrinking support for unification. The looming collapse of the once-dominant Kuomintang (KMT)—a party committed in theory to a unified China—and the electoral strength of the pro-independence Democratic People's Party (DPP) serve as the most obvious manifestations of these trends. But polls also reveal the extent of disaffection with China. Scarcely 10 percent of Taiwan's people support unification. A widening generational divide suggests support will continue to fall, since 80 percent of Taiwan's youth between ages 20-29 oppose unification. China's official news service, Xinhua, has delighted in trumpeting polls that showed beleaguered Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen falling in popularity. But Beijing can take little comfort in the fact that one of the few things that have proven consistently less popular in Taiwan than Presidents Tsai or KMT predecessor Ma Yingjeo has been the idea of unification with China.

Nothing Beijing has tried to woo or coerce Taiwan has worked. Chinese officials have expanded trade and investment opportunities, encouraged cultural exchanges, and warmed political contacts between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the KMT—all to no avail. In recent years, a

clearly frustrated Beijing has turned to coercion. The Chinese media has aired retired PLA generals' threats of invasion and stepped up publicity for high-profile military exercises designed to intimidate Taiwan. In January 2017, the PLA sailed its aircraft carrier through the Taiwan Strait in a move widely seen as a warning to Taiwan in the wake of President Tsai's phone conversation with U.S. President-elect Donald Trump. Yet support for unification in Taiwan continues to dwindle.

A clearly impatient Xi Jinping has dispensed with sentimental illusions designed to entice Taiwan's support for unification. Where his predecessors cultivated ambiguity about the meaning of "one China" when discussing the "1992 Consensus" with KMT officials, Xi has explicitly equated the Consensus with the Hong Kong-like "One China, Two Systems" arrangement. As explained by Taiwan Affairs Office Director Zhang Zhijun, Xi has determined that "one country, two systems will be the fundamental arrangement of the nation's system after reunification." Chinese officials no longer even bother to disguise their intent to purge the island of its democratic sentiments upon unification. In a chilling euphemism, Zhang stated that Beijing seeks a "spiritual matching" between the peoples of the two sides of the Strait to "strengthen solidarity" and enable "cohesion and the materialization of long term stability." He explained that this requires the "proper handling of the systemic and ideological differences between the two sides of the Strait after reunification." This language amounts to a pledge by Beijing to stamp out views at odds with Chinese unification and CPP ideology. Not surprisingly, the blunt approach has failed to win over Taiwan. Indeed, some Chinese experts and observers have grown pessimistic regarding cross-strait relations. Wang Zaixi, former deputy director of the Taiwan Affairs Office, stated in December, 2016, that the "possibility of peaceful unification continues to decline."

For those determined to compel Taiwan's unification, military subjugation remains a last option that, on the surface, appears viable. The PLA's modernization gains have been impressive, while Taiwan's military has atrophied. The anti-access, area denial (A2AD) challenge posed by China's formidable arsenal raises questions about the feasibility of U.S. involvement in a China-Taiwan conflict. However, a large-scale opposed amphibious assault remains among the most difficult of military operations. The PLA also would have to plan to fight the military of the world's superpower, the U.S., in such a scenario while controlling escalation. Moreover, the PLA continues to lack key capabilities—most notably, amphibious lift. For any military these factors would make the prospects of success slim at best, but the difficulty is compounded by the PLA's inexperience—it last fought a war in 1979. China has simpler, less risky military options available to it, but these are of doubtful

effectiveness. Missile bombardment and blockades can inflict serious damage, but historic experience suggests that such coercive actions are more likely to inflame resentment and harden Taiwan's stance against China. Only invasion, occupation, and the installation of a more compliant political authority can ensure unification, and for now this remains an extremely high-risk course of action.

Even if the PLA could pull off an invasion and defeat U.S. intervention, military subjugation of Taiwan would only worsen China's security environment. The most significant problem facing Chinese leaders would be the U.S. and regional response. Several trends raise the probability that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan could lead to subsequent regional wars. First, growing Chinese power has spurred wary regional rivals to step up military and diplomatic cooperation with one another and with the U.S. Second, regional polarization has encouraged each rival disputant with China to view how Beijing handles any dispute as possibly presaging its approach to other disputes. Military aggression against Taiwan could crystallize fears and prompt a coalition to contain, and possibly fight, China.

Stepped up regional cooperation. Growing Chinese power has driven the polarization of the region, spurring a zero-sum contest for influence with China's rivals, principally the U.S. and Japan. While struggling to maintain a stable bilateral relationship and contain tensions, China and the U.S. increasingly compete for diplomatic influence and economic opportunities. The growing rivalry between China and Japan has overlaid the one between China and the U.S. China and Japan routinely compete over investment projects, diplomatic influence and for control of the disputed Senkaku Islands. China and Vietnam have feuded over Chinese actions in the South China Sea, and Indian wariness of China has grown as well. Facing growing security tensions, Asian countries are arming up. In 2015, the region led the world in defense spending.

In this environment, countries are gravitating to either China or its rivals. Some countries, such as the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte and other countries in ASEAN, oscillate between the two sides. Others, such as Vietnam, Australia, and India, have quietly stepped up collaboration with Japan and the U.S. while not rupturing ties with China. Regional polarization has increased the receptiveness of China's rivals to any potentially useful ally. Considering its economic heft, geographic proximity, and military capability, Taiwan makes for an attractive candidate. The Trump-Tsai phone call gained widespread media attention, but other signs of warming U.S.-Taiwan relations can be seen in the decision to increase military exchanges. Japan and Taiwan have built a popular affinity for one another to strengthen bilateral relations as well. For example, the new U.S.-Japan defense guidelines

in 2015 agreed to open the possibility of Japanese support to U.S. forces in conflict, including in a Taiwan Strait scenario. Japan also recently provoked China's ire by renaming its office in Taipei from the "Office of International Exchange" to the "Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association." India and Taiwan have quietly stepped up ties in recent years through trade and political visits. Sensing opportunity, Tsai announced a policy initiative focused on strengthening the island's ties to South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania.

Taiwan and China's other disputes. China's growing power and aspirations to lead the region mean Taiwan's fate can no longer be viewed solely as a subset of Chinese politics, no matter how much Beijing may insist otherwise. More than in the case of Hong Kong, Beijing's treatment of Taiwan carries implications for its dealings with any country facing a territorial dispute with China. There are three reasons why this is so. First, China has defined its territorial disputes with other powers in similar terms, invoking the "core interests" of territory and sovereignty in each case. Second, China has declared that it intends to fully control its disputed claims. Xi has pledged "no compromise" on issues of Chinese territory. The question facing Chinese decision makers thus concerns how to control disputed territory, not whether to seek control. Third, China has pledged to settle disputes peacefully. A China that invades Taiwan to resolve its sovereignty status could be viewed as having abandoned this commitment. Countries could see aggression as evidence that Beijing might attack any country that opposed Chinese demands. In such a situation, Japan would rightly fear that China might use force to seize control of the Senkakus. India, Vietnam, and the Philippines would similarly have cause to fear Chinese intentions regarding disputed territories. Even countries not involved in a territorial dispute would have cause to fear Chinese power. The U.S. would probably experience a strong demand from Asian countries to engage in greater involvement throughout Asia. An attack on Taiwan could thus dramatically raise the possibility of an anti-China coalition and lead to a serious deterioration in China's security environment. If a regional war subsequently broke out, China would struggle to maintain economic growth and social stability, endangering its aspirations for national revitalization.

Conclusion

Despite declining prospects for peaceful unification by 2020, China faces serious constraints on its ability to invade and subjugate Taiwan. The geostrategic risks attending regional polarization have narrowed the range of acceptable Chinese justifications for attack. China might experience fewer international repercussions if it attacked a Taiwan that suddenly

declared independence. However, in most scenarios, neither the U.S. nor any other major power would recognize Taiwan, rendering such a declaration pointless. The futility of such a gesture is perhaps why popular support in Taiwan for de jure independence remains minimal. More plausible is the idea that Beijing might justify an attack on the ground that Taiwan has continued to resist demands that it adhere to a "one China" policy or other political demands. Recent media reports claim that Beijing is considering revising the Anti-Secession Law to create such red lines. Such laws could lay the legal and moral groundwork to justify military action. But warfare under these conditions carries high risks. Countries in Asia could reject such a justification as little more than political cover for aggression. After all, left unopposed, China could be tempted to employ a similar approach—i.e., imposing difficult to meet legal and moral demands, followed by military attack—to coerce neighbors into surrendering any territory that Beijing coveted.

China is not without options to flex its muscles, however. Beijing has at its disposal many tools it could use to make life difficult for the people of Taiwan. It can step up coercive military, economic, and political measures that damage economic growth and create instability. Beijing may hesitate to use these weapons, since inflicting hardship and coercing the people of Taiwan may gratify anxious nationalists but will do little to reconcile the people of Taiwan to China. However, it is possible that a frustrated Beijing lacking better options could apply pressure to coerce political gestures that at least bolster the illusion of progress towards unification. Taiwan's increasing engagement with China's rivals could well come at the price of a more friction-filled relationship with Beijing.

The U.S. should consider enhanced engagement to ensure stability across the Straits. On the one hand, Washington should continue to reassure Taiwan that it will fulfill its obligations per the Taiwan Relations Act. On the other, it should reassure China that the U.S. continues to uphold the One China policy and does not support Taiwan independence. Taiwan may face a more turbulent relationship with Beijing, but if it proceeds cautiously, it can be reasonably confident in maintaining its autonomy for many more years.

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