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The most dangerous place on Earth

America and China must work harder to avoid war over the future of Taiwan

The test of a first-rate intelligence, wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald, is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. For decades just such an exercise of high-calibre ambiguity has kept the peace between America and China over Taiwan, an island of 24m people, 100 miles (160km) off China's coast. Leaders in Beijing say there is only one China, which they run, and that Taiwan is a rebellious part of it. America nods to the one China idea, but has spent 70 years ensuring there are two.

Today, however, this strategic ambiguity is breaking down. The United States is coming to fear that it may no longer be able to deter China from seizing Taiwan by force. Admiral Phil Davidson, who heads the Indo-Pacific Command, told Congress in March that he worried about China attacking Taiwan as soon as 2027.

War would be a catastrophe, and not only because of the bloodshed in Taiwan and the risk of escalation between two nuclear powers. One reason is economic. The island lies at the heart of the semiconductor industry. tsmc, the world's most valuable chipmaker, etches 84% of the most advanced chips. Were production at tsmc to stop, so would the global electronics industry, at incalculable cost. The firm's technology and know-how are perhaps a decade ahead of its rivals', and it will take many years of work before either America or China can hope to catch up.

The bigger reason is that Taiwan is an arena for the rivalry between China and America. Although the United States is not treaty-bound to defend Taiwan, a Chinese assault would be a test of America's military might and its diplomatic and political resolve. If the Seventh Fleet failed to turn up, China would overnight become the dominant power in Asia. America's allies around the world would know that they could not count on it. Pax Americana would collapse.

To understand how to avoid conflict in the Taiwan Strait, start with the contradictions that have kept the peace during the past few decades. The government in Beijing insists it has a duty to bring about unification—even, as a last resort, by means of invasion. The Taiwanese, who used to agree that their island was part of China (albeit a non-Communist one), have taken to electing governments that stress its separateness, while stopping short of declaring independence. And America has protected Taiwan from Chinese aggression, even though it recognises the government in Beijing. These opposing ideas are bundled into what Fitzgerald's diplomatic inheritors blithely call the "status quo". In fact, it is a roiling, seething source of neurosis and doubt.

What has changed of late is America's perception of a tipping-point in China's cross-strait military build-up, 25 years in the making. The Chinese navy has launched 90 major ships and submarines in the past five years, four to five times as many as America has in the western Pacific. China builds over 100 advanced fighter planes each year; it has deployed space weapons and is bristling with precision missiles that can hit Taiwan, us Navy vessels and American bases in Japan, South Korea and Guam. In the war games that simulate a Chinese attack on Taiwan, America has started to lose.

Some American analysts conclude that military superiority will sooner or later tempt China into using force against Taiwan, not as a last resort but because it can. China has talked itself into believing that America wants to keep the Taiwan crisis boiling and may even want a war to contain China's rise. It has trampled the idea that Hong Kong has a separate system of government, devaluing a similar offer designed to win over the people of Taiwan to peaceful unification. In the South China Sea it has been converting barren reefs into military bases.

Although China has clearly become more authoritarian and nationalistic, this analysis is too pessimistic—perhaps because hostility to China is becoming the default in America. Xi Jinping, China's president, has not even begun to prepare his people for a war likely to inflict mass casualties and economic pain on all sides. In its 100th year the Communist Party is building its claim to power on prosperity, stability and China's status in its region and growing role in the world. All that would be jeopardised by an attack whose result, whatever the us Navy says, comes with lots of uncertainty attached, not least over how to govern a rebellious Taiwan. Why would Mr Xi risk it all now, when China could wait until the odds are even better?

Yet that brings only some comfort. Nobody in America can really know what Mr Xi intends today, let alone what he or his successor may want in the future. China's impatience is likely to grow. Mr Xi's appetite for risk may sharpen, especially if he wants unification with Taiwan to crown his legacy.

If they are to ensure that war remains too much of a gamble for China, America and Taiwan need to think ahead. Work to re-establish an equilibrium across the Taiwan Strait will take years. Taiwan must start to devote fewer resources to big, expensive weapons systems that are vulnerable to Chinese missiles and more to tactics and technologies that would frustrate an invasion.

America requires weapons to deter China from launching an amphibious invasion; it must prepare its allies, including Japan and South Korea; and it needs to communicate to China that its battle plans are credible. This will be a tricky balance to strike. Deterrence usually strives to be crystal-clear about retaliation. The message here is more subtle. China must be discouraged from trying to change Taiwan's status by force even as it is reassured that America will not support a dash for formal independence by Taiwan. The risk of a superpower arms race is high.

Be under no illusions how hard it is to sustain ambiguity. Hawks in Washington and Beijing will always be able to portray it as weakness. And yet, seemingly useful shows of support for Taiwan, such as American warships making port calls on the island, could be misread as a dangerous shift in intentions.

Most disputes are best put to rest. Those that can be resolved only in war can often be put off and, as China's late leader Deng Xiaoping said, left to wiser generations. Nowhere presents such a test of statesmanship as the most dangerous place on Earth.