

INTERVIEW

Xi's potential 2027 transition poses threat to Taiwan: Davidson

Former Indo-Pacific commander explains why he worries about 'the next 6 years'



Adm. Philip Davidson speaks at the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command change of command at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, on April 30, where he handed over the reins to Adm. John Aquilino. (Photo courtesy of the Department of Defense)

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WASHINGTON -- An American military commander sent shock waves around the world during his congressional testimony earlier this year when he nailed down a specific time frame on a possible Taiwan contingency.

Then-Adm. Philip Davidson, at the time commanding the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, was asked by a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee in March about a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

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Davidson, who is now retired and joined the Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA's advisory committee on projects, told Nikkei on Tuesday that he was conscious of Chinese President Xi Jinping's leadership terms when calculating the timeline.

Xi is widely expected to stay in power beyond the next quinquennial national congress of the Communist Party in the autumn of 2022. But when the party convenes again five years later, in 2027, there could be a transition, Davidson said, which may impact the decision to move on Taiwan.

Edited excerpts from the interview follow.

Q: Your analysis that a threat in the Taiwan Strait could materialize in the next six years has triggered a wide debate among security experts in the Indo-Pacific. We believe it is important to accurately understand what you meant to say.

A: What it means, explicitly, is that the changes in the [People's Liberation Army]'s capabilities, with their missile and cyber forces, and their ability to train, advance their joint interoperability and their combat support logistics, all those trend lines indicate to me that within the next six years they will have the capability and the capacity to forcibly reunify with Taiwan, should they choose force to do it.

At the same time, within the next six years, it is clear to me that China is pursuing an all-of-party approach that seeks to coerce, corrupt and co-opt the international community in a way in which they may be able to achieve their geopolitical edge, in what some describe as "the hybrid zone" or "the gray zone" or the "three warfares," or "lawfare," any of those things, to force Taiwan to capitulate because of extreme, diplomatic, economic, pressure and strain.

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I said "should China *choose* to use force." That choice becomes much more probable within the next six years because of the potential for Xi Jinping's transition in 2027, as his political future is determined principally by himself, and his ability to garner some support for that may depend on that 2027 timeline.

Q: Some analysts would say that the PLA's capability is already superior to that of the U.S. in a potential conflict over the Taiwan Strait. What is your assessment?

A: The Chinese capability is improving. Certainly their capacity, the numbers of forces they have, that's improving as well. They are closing the gap with United States and Japanese forces. They are closing that gap with training, by establishing joint command and control structures, and by working the combat support logistics that's necessary there.



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They're also advancing their capability sets. That's principally air, sea, cyber spaces, rocket forces, space forces principally. They did take some risk in their land forces in order to find the funds to advance those capabilities, and they are investing heavily there.

But, at the moment, I think U.S. and Japanese forces are in the lead.

Q: How important is it for the U.S. and Japan to coordinate strategies in light of a Taiwan emergency?

A: The U.S.-Japan alliance is the most critical alliance for the United States throughout the course of this decade, certainly, and I would say decades to come as well. Deepening our defense cooperation is critical.

There are some things that we need to do to raise the surety level in both nations. That relates to the deepening of our scrupulous management of our cybersecurity networks. That would allow us to deepen our intelligence and information sharing.

And when we say information sharing, that speaks to planning, that speaks to operational cooperation, it speaks to tactical cooperation at sea, and air, and all those kind of things.

I was quite pleased with the advances that I was able to make during my time. I will tell you that our planning, our bilateral planning obligations, are deeper and more transparent than they've ever been, and we need to continue to advance in that direction.

Q: Should the U.S. abandon "strategic ambiguity" and clarify that it will defend Taiwan in the case of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait?

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Over the last several months, there has been considerable thought put into whether it should be changed, and [there is an] agreement that the policy of strategic ambiguity should be maintained for now. And I'm in agreement with that.

Q: Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has ordered a global posture review to deal with the current challenges, primarily China. What will that look like, and how will it impact Japan?

A: The last three administrations have made it quite clear that the Indo-Pacific theater is to be the priority theater going forward.

Certainly the support that the United States gets from Japan, in terms of bases and capability in Japan, is critical to that future, but the United States also needs a more expeditionary posture external to Japan, throughout the Indo-Pacific region, that could help deter in peacetime and the day-to-day posture, as well as having places to go in a crisis, to help dissuade PLA adventurism.

To be frank, the posture required in the Indo-Pacific needs to be -- the expeditionary posture especially -- much more robust.

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