



China's ambitions for Taiwan

In a speech on 1 July 2021 marking the centenary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, President Xi Jinping warned the world that Taiwan would be incorporated in China under the 'one-China' policy, by force if necessary. He said: "Resolving the Taiwan question and realising China's complete reunification is ... an unshakable commitment of the Communist Party of China ... We will uphold the one-China principle ... [and] take resolute action to utterly defeat any attempt toward 'Taiwan independence'."¹

From the 1980s, the People's Republic of China (China), under Chinese Communist Party (CCP)² rule since 1949, pursued a strategy to make the country the primary manufacturing hub in the world and to boost its technological capabilities to First World levels. In both aims, China has been remarkably successful, lifting hundreds of millions of its citizens out of poverty towards prosperity. More recently, under President Xi Jinping, the nation's focus has changed to being the leading world power by 2050, with its interests overriding those of the international community and itself exempt from international norms of trade, diplomacy and international relations. This change of direction has brought China into disagreement with its neighbours and with the West generally.

Trading on the long-standing CCP grievance of China's 'bullying' by foreign powers during previous centuries, for reasons which are opaque, President Xi has convinced the CCP that foreign powers are intent on disrupting the industrial and commercial infrastructure along its east coast through military action. China, thus, has invested immense sums in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), creating the world's largest navy and matching capacities in missiles and air power. The CCP ousted neighbouring countries from South China Sea islands and defied international law to occupy and militarise adjacent reefs, which are now part of China's 'First Island Chain'³ of defence. This leads us to the issue of Taiwan, a cornerstone of the First Island Chain.

The Republic of Taiwan occupies around 36,000 km². Largely mountainous, nearly 25 million citizens call the main island home, putting it amongst the world's most densely populated countries. Ethnic Chinese immigration began in the 17th century when the Dutch ruled Taiwan, and it was annexed by the Qing Dynasty in 1683. Ceded to the Japanese in 1895, it was to Taiwan that the defeated Nationalist Chinese (KMT)⁴ forces withdrew in 1949. The CCP regards Taiwan as a province of China to be recovered, forcibly if necessary, a stance tacitly supported internationally by acceptance of the 'one-China' policy, which has isolated Taiwan diplomatically.

From the 1960s, Taiwan experienced rapid industrial and technological development. It produces 40 per cent of the world's computer chips, is the 12th largest steel manufacturer, and chemical production accounts for one third of its gross domestic product (GDP). Four of the world's top 20 container shipping lines are headquartered in Taiwan. The nation's GDP is rated 20th in the world – Australia is 13th – and Taiwan is our 7th largest trading partner. This century Taiwan witnessed political renaissance, with KMT influence declining from 2014 and the rise of new democratic – and Taiwan-centric – parties. Close and mutually beneficial industrial ties with China in the period 2005-2014 have been dissolved under the leadership of current President Tsai Ing-wen, and the island nation has striven for international recognition and release from any Chinese threat of forcible reunification.

The Taiwanese are clearly serious about defending their own territory. Its defence force numbers 165,000 regulars and ten times more reservists. It operates 739 military aircraft, including 286 fighters and an anti-submarine wing; its navy has 117 ships in commission, including four destroyers, 22 frigates and four submarines; the land forces operate 1160 tanks, 8275 amphibious combat vehicles⁵, 257 self-propelled artillery vehicles and 1160 towed artillery pieces.

Taiwan's principal international defender is the United States (US), which forestalled Chinese attempts to assault the island in 1954-55, 1958 and 1996. The CCP, however, again might attempt to annex Taiwan by force, particularly since President Xi has said that it will if it has to. Equally, there are factors that might stay China's hand. Against determined Taiwanese resistance, the PLA would need to deploy millions of men and most of its naval and air forces, particularly as

¹Full text of Xi Jinping's speech on the CCP's 100th anniversary. *Nikkei Asia* 2 July 2021 at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-on-the-CCP-s-100th-anniversary>, accessed on 11 July 2021.

²While usually referred to as the Chinese Communist Party by Western media, the CCP prefers to be known as the Communist Party of China (CPC).

³The first island chain refers to the first chain of major archipelagos out from the coast of mainland east Asia. It extends from the Kamchatka Peninsula in the northeast to the Malay Peninsula in the southwest; and incorporates the Kuril Islands, the Japanese Archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the northern Philippines, and Borneo; and encloses the Sea of Okhotsk, Sea of Japan, Yellow Sea, East China Sea, Taiwan Strait and South China Sea.

⁴KMT: Kuomintang – the Nationalist Party of China, also called the Chinese Nationalist Party.

⁵ACVs: amphibious armoured personnel carriers.

the Japanese Deputy Prime Minister, Taro Aso, recently signalled his country's willingness, with the US, to defend Taiwan against Chinese attack⁶. The PLA might lose the military struggle, or suffer significant casualties that make any victory Pyrrhic. 'Face' is critically important to the CCP leadership; a setback would unseat Xi. As well, the CCP and PLA cannot discount the US deciding that Taiwan is the line in the sand beyond which it will not countenance Chinese powerplays in the region. Ambiguity over US intentions is a powerful weapon in the counter-China arsenal.

To further curb the CCP's ardour for armed conflict, 'push-back' against Chinese demands should continue and those nations willing to support Taiwan militarily should look to their own abilities and improve upon them. Strengthening and supporting Taiwanese efforts to bolster its own defence capabilities is also sound strategy. Finally, there are numerous other levers the international community have with China to dissuade it from any military assault on Taiwan. Trade, the commercial relationships on which Chinese affluence is built, and access to raw materials are some of them. Reconsideration of acceptance of the 'one-China' policy is another.

Collectively, concerned nations should make it clear to the CCP that any attack on Taiwan would have serious consequences, without necessarily spelling out what they would be. The CCP will have to decide whether the risks outweigh the rewards. Let us make sure, however, that we can deliver on our promises of retaliation should the Chinese choose the armed assault option.

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⁶Deputy PM says Japan must defend Taiwan with U.S. *The Japanese Times* 6 July 2021. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/07/06/national/taro-aso-taiwan-defense/>, accessed 11 July 2021.

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