



WHY XI JINPING MAY NOT BE ITCHING FOR A WAR WITH TAIWAN

BY JOEL WUTHNOW

China's military maneuvers near Taiwan are becoming bigger and bolder. In a single day in September, the Chinese air force sent more than [100 warplanes](#) into the island's southwestern "air defense identification zone" and across the midline of the Taiwan Strait—the largest incursion in history. This followed [large-scale naval drills](#) involving an aircraft carrier sailing to the east of Taiwan.

As tensions mount ahead of Taiwan's January presidential election, analysts are asking whether recent Chinese activities are just shows of force, or whether Xi Jinping could be [readying his forces](#) for war. Some senior officials have already suggested a war could come sooner than later. Last year, Delaware [Senator Chris Coons](#) said that China could opt for a strategy of "go early and go strong," and in January, Air Force general [Mike Minihan](#) said "My gut tells me" there will be a fight in 2025.

Any war of choice for China would involve a consideration of the risks and rewards. For now, the risks for Xi far exceed the potential benefits.

Economically, a war would expose China to massive sanctions, which New York-based consultancy Rhodium Group [estimated](#) could impact more than \$3 trillion in Chinese assets abroad and trillions more in trade flows. One [lesson](#) for Beijing from Russia's misadventure in Ukraine was the surprisingly high degree of coordination between Washington and its allies in punishing aggression. Similar G7 coordination would compound an already [bleak economic picture](#) for China, marked by falling exports and a real estate crisis. Accepting the added risk of war would be out of step with Beijing's modus operandi, which is to [focus inwards](#) when things are going poorly at home.

Militarily, there would be no guarantee of success. China's armed forces have trained hard for a cross-

Strait scenario but continue to face [numerous problems](#). These include forces that have not gone to war since 1979 and the logistical nightmare involved in crossing a 100nm strait under fire.

Russia's military woes in Ukraine highlights another liability for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). China's military planners have long assumed that a war would be decided within weeks—mirroring the US victory in the 1990-1991 Gulf War—but they are now [coming to terms](#) with the changing character of warfare. Ukrainian defenders have showed the PLA how large inventories of low-cost munitions can force an attacker into a stalemate. Chinese military analysts paid exceptionally [close attention](#) to the apparent ease with which Ukrainian forces used two long-range anti-ship missiles to sink the Russian Black Sea Fleet flagship *Moskva* in April 2022. Chinese warships closing in on Taiwan would face similar dangers.

An invasion could also expand far beyond a narrow contest with Taiwan. President Biden has now on [four occasions](#) stated that US forces are likely to intervene, and Beijing would also have to consider Japanese and possibly Australian [intervention](#). Such a conflict could quickly spiral out of control, and could lead to nuclear use.

The problems inherent to a full-scale attack have led to greater attention to a [Chinese blockade](#) of Taiwan. This would play to China's strengths with the region's largest navy and coast guard, and could spark major economic disruptions for an island that [stockpiles](#) only eleven days of natural gas reserves. Yet a blockade holds risks of its own for China. Taiwan, backed by the US Navy, could try to run the blockade and galvanize an international coalition to aid an island democracy. This would put Beijing in the position of escalating to a general war or suffering the humiliation of backing down.

Moreover, all this assumes that Xi is confident in his military's leadership. Recent purges of senior PLA officials, including the commander of the [Rocket Force](#) (responsible for China's nuclear ICBM arsenal) and the [defense minister](#), suggest a lack of trust from Xi in those he appointed. Those scandals are even more concerning because they have implicated the [acquisition system](#). Xi has reportedly instructed the PLA to be better prepared for a Taiwan contingency [by 2027](#), but how confident can he be if the PLA's system for buying and building advanced weapons is plagued by scandal? What other defects might he fear the PLA to be hiding from him?

Politically, Xi would be putting his own rule on the line. Xi has consolidated power to the greatest degree since Mao, but the downside is that everyone knows who to blame when things go wrong. Signs advocating an [overturning of Xi](#) during last year's anti-zero-COVID protests underscore the political risks of a military debacle.

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On the reward side of the ledger, Xi could claim credit for finishing the business of unifying the country leftover from the Chinese Civil War when Nationalist forces fled the mainland to Taiwan. This could count as a crowning achievement, fixing his place in the Chinese Communist Party pantheon. However, Xi has never defined his legacy in terms of reunification. Rather, he has [spoken more](#) about the need to raise the standard of living, build China into a technological powerhouse, and expand its global influence—goals which could be thrown into total disarray in any war, win or lose.

The United States can take steps to keep Xi's calculus pointing away from war. Washington can do so by developing credible plans to sanction acts of aggression. Washington can also help Taiwan procure precision munitions (such as Stingers, Javelins, anti-ship cruise missiles, and combat drones), stockpile critical resources, and build reserve forces that could be called up if the PLA resorts to force.

Of course, the war might not be one of choice, but rather one of political necessity for China. Xi could accept more risk if Taiwan declares independence—an unlikely move for any Taiwan leader given the risks—or if Washington is seen to be lining up in favor of an independent Taiwan. Along with maintaining support for the status quo, US officials should thus be careful to avoid hollow acts such as public visits to the island, however well-intended they may be. Such actions not only put Xi in a political bind, but are [opposed](#) by most Taiwan residents.

Before he retired, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mark Milley [discussed the goals](#) of US strategy in convincing China not to use force: “You want to make sure that every single day President Xi wakes up and says today's not that day, and that decision never comes.”

Prudent investments in Taiwan's defense and sensible cross-Strait policies can ensure that Xi never does reach that conclusion.