

What do we do when Beijing turns up heat on Taiwan?

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China will use grey area tactics of bullying rather than bullets against its rival in Taipei. Those may be difficult to counter.

We should be preparing for a catastrophic war across the Taiwan Strait, if recent public commentary is any indication.

However, the common assumption that informs these analyses – that Beijing would attack Taiwan – is outdated. A military invasion of Taiwan by the People's Republic of China (PRC) cannot be ruled out, but is improbable.

President Xi Jinping is much more likely to rely on a protracted and intensive campaign, using 'all means short of war', to force Taiwan's leadership to negotiate and thereby achieve Beijing's long-cherished goal of unification.

Australia should prepare for a scenario in which Beijing adopts an aggressive mix of new technologies and conventional methods to apply pressure on Taiwan.

These range from economic pressure or an embargo, via intimidation, dissemination operations, cyber attacks, and covert actions and subversion, to assassination and the limited use of military force.

In a new *China Matters Explores* policy brief I describe how one such scenario could play out.

The United States and others in the region, including Australia, would find it extremely difficult to counter these moves. No individual action by the PRC would warrant a military response, but collectively they could allow Beijing to achieve its aim. The PRC has employed a similar step-by-step approach to solidify its territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Xi's aim would be to force Taiwan's leadership to agree to unification talks premised on Beijing's precondition that there is only 'one China'.

Once these political talks start, Xi could declare success for having paved the way to unification. Talks could take years, but Xi would be lauded for bringing the nation closer to the 'China Dream' of which unification is central.

[Xi does not want to fight a war over Taiwan](#). Failure to achieve unification would be a devastating blow to Xi personally and to the Communist Party of China (CPC).

Despite significant improvement of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) capabilities, the outcome of a large-scale PRC amphibious invasion is impossible to predict.

Taiwan's terrain is notoriously difficult, and Taiwan has laid an extensive system of sea mines. And though some analysts highlight the PRC's superior [anti-access/area-denial \(A2/AD\)](#) weaponry and question whether the US would prevail in a war, the PLA has not had combat experience for over 30 years. Interoperability is continuously pinpointed as a PLA weakness.

Were the PRC to occupy Taiwan, it would be a nightmare to try and govern. The vast majority of [Taiwan's 23 million people do not favour unification now or later](#). Most want to postpone decisions about Taiwan's future.

Lastly, military conflict would mean the end to any meaningful co-operation with the PRC by many nations which have been instrumental to its modernisation.

Unresolved Chinese civil war

In sum, although the PRC's threat to use force is credible – unification is closely linked to the unresolved Chinese civil war and CPC legitimacy – 'all means short of war' is a much more likely strategy for Xi to achieve a historic legacy as the unifier of China.

Ominously last May Beijing dropped 'peaceful' from its proclaimed aim to 'reunify' with Taiwan. And this January it called for legally advancing the process of unification under the "One Country, Two Systems plan for Taiwan".

Beijing relied on legal measures – the passing of the Hong Kong National Security Law – to justify actions that are now eroding Hong Kong's autonomy.

An intensive campaign using 'all means short of war' could also lead to miscalculation and military conflict. Australia must prepare for either case.

The US is not obligated under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act to come to Taiwan's defence militarily. [If President Joe Biden decided to do so](#), he would take for granted Australia's participation alongside the US.

Determining what role Australia would take – if Canberra decided to join the US – is vital.

Most importantly, because of the likelihood of a protracted pressure campaign rather than outright war, Canberra must also decide how important Taiwan is to Australia as an independent entity.

What would Canberra do if Beijing shut down the power and communication networks in Taiwan? Is Canberra willing to suffer retaliatory measures far greater than the current ones being meted out today by the PRC?

As long as Australia-PRC ties remain frozen, Canberra should encourage others who have more sway with Beijing to apply quiet diplomacy to prevent a PRC campaign to coerce Taiwan.

Beijing needs to be persuaded to accept Taiwan's long-standing offer to enter into cross-Strait political talks without preconditions, something it has thus far refused to do.

Persuasion and pressure – for example, a warning that recognition of 'one China' is in danger – can only succeed if there is solidarity, ideally among European, North American and most Indo-Pacific nations.

That is a tall order. But it is not impossible. We must not be complacent nor turn our backs on diplomacy.

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