

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Xi's obsession with Taiwan

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On 22 May 1995, the Clinton administration announced that President Lee Teng-hui had been granted a visa to give a speech at his alma mater, Cornell University. Beijing was furious. Lee would be the first president from the Republic of China (ROC) – Taiwan's official name – to set foot on American soil since Washington broke off diplomatic ties with Taipei in 1979 and recognised Beijing as the sole legitimate representative of China. I remember listening to the news in Beijing and wondering what the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) would do, besides merely denouncing the decision, to display its anger. From Beijing's viewpoint, its "one China" principle was being undermined and if this trend continued, American and regional support for an independent Taiwan would gather momentum.

Beijing's response came forty-six days later. Xinhua news agency announced that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would conduct missile tests in the waters near Taiwan from 21 to 28 July. Those first

tests were followed by more tests, as well as live ammunition exercises and joint PLA naval and air force exercises including highly publicised amphibious assault exercises. Beijing wanted to make it absolutely clear to Washington that the US commitment to a one China policy meant that senior Taiwanese officials were not permitted to visit the United States. Taiwan was not to be allowed space on the international stage.

Tensions between Beijing and Washington soared, especially after US aircraft carrier *Nimitz* and four escort vessels passed through the Taiwan Strait in December. Three months later, on the eve of the first democratic presidential elections in Taiwan, President Bill Clinton dispatched two aircraft carrier battle groups to the region, sparking fears that the PRC and the United States were on the brink of war.

Fast-forward twenty-six years and one cannot avoid a sense of déjà vu.

The repeated sorties by PLA aircraft into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (although keeping within international airspace) have served many functions, including trying to intimidate Taiwan and display the PLA's growing military might. Above all, as in 1995–96, the PLA's actions today reflect Beijing's anger and determination to signal that a formal separation between the mainland and Taiwan is unacceptable.

Since taking office a year ago, US president Joe Biden has continued the Trump administration's policies aimed at normalising Taiwan's international engagement. Now other countries are following suit. In 1995, PRC officials said to me privately: "If we don't stop this kind of movement towards a separate Taiwan, we will wake up one day

to the US demand that we accept Taiwanese independence.” There is no doubt that the same is being said in Beijing today.

After the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, analysts such as Robert Ross delved into the details of the ten-month period of elevated tensions: the governments in Beijing, Taipei and Washington engaged in many types of signalling, to each other and to domestic audiences, and negotiated quietly behind closed doors. Ross concluded that none of the three parties had any intention to go to war. “China used coercive diplomacy to threaten costs until the United States and Taiwan changed their policies,” Ross writes in his 2009 book. “The United States used deterrence diplomacy to communicate both to the Chinese and regional leaders the credibility of its strategic commitments.”

Xi’s patience is wearing thin

Now, as in 1995–96, no one wants war. Beijing continues to rely on coercive diplomacy and Washington on deterrence diplomacy. However, it would be a mistake to presume that the current fraught cross-Strait situation will be defused as it has been so many times over the past seven decades. Tensions have waxed and waned ever since Chiang Kai-shek and his defeated Nationalist (Kuomintang) troops fled to Taiwan in 1949 after the post-World War II Chinese Civil War and the capital of the Republic of China moved from Nanjing on the mainland to Taipei, Taiwan’s largest city.

Today's tensions are more precarious than ever because all three parties instrumental to Taiwan's future – Taiwan, the PRC and the United States – have changed their approach.

What hasn't changed is the unbending persistence by the PRC that Taiwan is part of China. And that the PLA will use force if necessary to deter Taiwanese independence.

Whether peace can be maintained across the Strait will depend on above all, which path PRC president Xi Jinping takes to achieve unification, which, in his words, is “an inevitable requirement for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people”.

Cross-Strait tensions

Taiwan is becoming more and more repulsed by the authoritarian policies of Xi and less and less inclined to consider a future linked together with the PRC. The United States under Biden has continued the Trump administration's policy of treating Taiwan as a normal country in new subtle ways, while asserting it still upholds Washington's commitment to officially recognise only “one China” – the one that the PRC represents. And in Beijing, Xi's patience is wearing thin. Importantly, the PRC government has become increasingly vexed with actions in support of Taiwan by the United States and others. Beijing is desperate to stop what it sees as creeping efforts that will lead to recognition by the international community of a separate, independent Taiwan.

Several additional factors have changed over the past years. These are severely straining the peace that has prevailed for more than five decades.

First, Xi has explicitly said he is no longer content to patiently wait for unification to materialise “one day” and wants to oversee unification in his lifetime. Before Xi, the Communist Party of China (CPC) grudgingly tolerated the status quo and put unification to one side while trying to win the hearts and minds of the Taiwanese people through lucrative trade, investment and business opportunities. But Xi’s exact words in 2019 were that unification “should not be left to future generations”. This is a direct rebuttal of Deng Xiaoping’s pragmatic approach to the Taiwan dilemma. Deng’s tacit acceptance of kicking the can down the road laid the foundation of peace despite repeated pledges by every CPC leader since Deng that unification is paramount.

Second, the PRC has become more assertive in the past few years, alarming policymakers in Washington and across the region. Xi has proven less risk-averse than his predecessors.

Third, the PLA’s modernisation drive undertaken over the last twenty-plus years has shifted the balance of military power in the Taiwan Strait unequivocally to the PRC. Six years ago, the US Office of Naval Intelligence already assessed that the PRC has a technologically advanced and flexible force that (without US intervention) gives Beijing the capability to conduct a military campaign successfully within the first island chain (for instance, to take Taiwan or the Senkaku Islands).

In particular, the PRC has enhanced its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, which are designed to deny freedom of movement

to potential adversaries, especially the United States, and prevent them from intervening in a conflict near the PRC's coast or from attacking the Chinese mainland. If hostilities erupted, it would be unthinkable for US aircraft carrier *Nimitz* to breeze through the Taiwan Strait, as it did in 1995.

Fourth, relations between Beijing and Washington have deteriorated markedly in the past few years. The political mood in Washington is strikingly anti-China. In a city where Republicans and Democrats are at loggerheads, the one issue they agree on is that the United States must curb Xi's ambitions. Xi, in turn, has stirred up domestic nationalists by emphasising the need to "put all our minds and energies in preparing for war and remain on high alert".

Fifth, the economic interdependence and people-to-people engagement between the PRC and Taiwan continues to deepen despite political tensions. What is often lost in analysis is that Taiwan's prosperity is heavily dependent on the PRC, and that hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese live permanently in the PRC. Taiwan is extremely reliant on exports to the PRC despite efforts to diversify. In 2020, close to 44 per cent of Taiwan's exports went to the PRC (including Hong Kong), a 14 per cent increase from 2019. The value of exports was equivalent to about 15 per cent of Taiwan's GDP in 2020. For comparison, Australia's exports to the PRC in 2020 were equivalent to 8 per cent of its GDP.

What has further changed in the last decade is the composition of those exports and the PRC's increasing reliance on sophisticated

Taiwanese integrated circuits (ICs), which are used in semiconductor chips and the manufacture of several advanced technologies such as aerospace components and electric vehicles. Every other Taiwanese industry continues to be of secondary importance in PRC–Taiwan trade, despite the Trump administration’s restrictions on selling ICs with American components to the PRC. The PRC is a major exporter of less advanced ICs but needs to import the more sophisticated versions.

The PRC is making concerted efforts to decrease its dependence on imported semiconductors. How this dependence will impact the cross-Strait dynamic is unclear. The PRC wants access to Taiwanese semiconductor technology; on the other hand, a military conflict would disrupt and possibly devastate Taiwan’s high-tech manufacturing capabilities.

Beijing regards Taiwan as a renegade province and treats it as such

Hong Kong turned the tide

Taiwan, the PRC and the United States are all constantly trying to change the status quo. This complex situation is further complicated by the fact that all three parties interpret the status quo differently.

From Taiwan’s viewpoint, the status quo means that the island functions independently and is a self-governed democracy. Taiwan has its own currency and military. Taiwanese use passports that say

“Republic of China” (the country established in 1911 by the Nationalists) and fly the ROC flag. Self-rule in Taiwan’s case means de facto rather than de jure independence.

In Taiwan, negative attitudes toward unification have increased since Xi Jinping rose to power in 2012, and have become even stronger since Beijing’s crackdown on civil liberties in Hong Kong. Taiwanese voted in Tsai Ing-wen, Taiwan’s president, for a second term to a large extent because of her unambiguous support for the Hong Kong demonstrators and pledge that Taiwan would not become the next Hong Kong: “As long as I’m president, one country, two systems will never be an option.” An overwhelming number of Taiwanese – 82.8 per cent, according to 2021 polling – reject the PRC’s “one country two systems” model for unification. Even before Xi, a sense of separate national identity among Taiwanese was growing. Today, polls show that 63.3 per cent of Taiwanese identify solely as Taiwanese, not Chinese.

From Washington’s perspective, the key facet of the status quo is conflict avoidance. The Biden administration brushes off Beijing’s accusations that its current actions contradict its commitment recognising the government of the PRC as the sole legal government of China. This commitment, which acknowledges the PRC position that Taiwan is part of China, was made in 1979 when Washington switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. The commitment also acknowledges that the United States has the right to maintain cultural, commercial and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan.

Taiwan is a bleeding ulcer

From the viewpoint of the CPC, the unresolved political status of Taiwan is a bleeding ulcer. It is a reminder that the Chinese Civil War remains unfinished, that the CPC has not yet fulfilled its mission to “reunify” China. Xi Jinping has clearly stated that “resolving the Taiwan question is . . . the unshakeable commitment of the Communist Party of China. It is also a shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation.”

As so often happens in long-standing territorial disputes, the parties do not even agree on terminology. While both sides use the same word in Chinese – *tongyi* – in English, the PRC uses the term “reunification” and Taiwan uses “unification”, as it has never been part of Communist China. After Japan’s defeat in 1945, the ROC assumed the administration of the province of Taiwan, which had been a Japanese colony since 1895. The PRC, in turn, emphasises that before becoming a Japanese colony, Taiwan was part of Qing Dynasty China from 1683 to 1895.

The notion that Taiwan and mainland China will one day be unified is embedded in the CPC’s public education. Taiwanese independence is a non-starter even for those PRC citizens who are critical of the Communist Party; even for those who feel Xi has unnecessarily provoked the United States; even for those who have visited Taiwan and admire its civil liberties and democratic politics. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Strait, public education in Taiwan since 2000 has emphasised a separate Taiwanese identity, to the degree that one might mistakenly think that Taiwanese culture is totally separate from

Chinese culture. More than 95 per cent of people in Taiwan and 92 per cent of the entire PRC population are of the same Han ethnic ancestry. On even a casual visit to Fujian province on the mainland, across the Strait from Taiwan, one is vividly reminded that Taiwanese and Fujianese worship the same gods at similar-looking temples, eat the same traditional foods, and have the same ancestor-worshipping traditions. At home and among friends, the majority of Fujianese and Taiwanese speak the same minnan dialect, while Mandarin is the official language on both sides. What separates them is their political systems. Fujianese live under one-party Communist rule; for over two decades, Taiwanese have lived in a vibrant democracy.

Beijing regards Taiwan as a renegade province and treats it as such. The PRC government refuses to address the Taiwanese president as “president”, explicitly rejecting the legitimacy of Taiwanese elected officials, and instead uses “leader”. Regardless of how strong and prosperous the PRC becomes, its leadership will not accept Taiwan’s separateness. The pursuit of unification is central to CPC legitimacy.

All nations (except thirteen small ones and the Holy See) recognise Beijing as the sole representative of “one China”. Beijing is resolute that Taiwan is not represented in any international body in which membership requires recognised nationhood, including the United Nations and its sub-organisations.

PRC officials take extreme actions to enforce Taiwan’s international isolation. For example, in Perth in 2017, PRC participants caused a commotion by shouting and speaking into the microphone over the

meeting's chairperson to protest the presence of Taiwanese delegates at the opening session of a Kimberley Process meeting to promote oversight of the diamond industry. The PRC participants would not relent until the Taiwanese delegation was ejected from the meeting. Even following natural disasters such as the Kobe earthquake, and during the Covid-19 pandemic, the PRC has insisted that international aid and communication about health measures must be conducted via Beijing.

Trump's intervention

For decades, Taiwan has aspired to break out of this international isolation, especially since transitioning to democracy in the 1990s. But until a few years ago, other nations heeded Beijing's demands that Taiwan cannot be treated

as a sovereign nation. Elaborate diplomatic language made it possible for Taiwan, the world's twentieth-largest economy by purchasing power parity, to join economic organisations, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (as "Chinese Taipei") and the World Trade Organization (as a "separate customs territory").

But, other than on issues directly related to Taiwan's economy, the rest of the world has avoided challenging Beijing. That is, until the Trump administration initiated low-key projects and policies intended to normalise Taiwan's international engagement. Washington allowed

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previously timid
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more high-level political interaction between Taipei and Washington; made public its official interaction; and found ingenious ways of circumventing Beijing's insistence on Taiwan's exclusion from any organisation requiring sovereignty.

The 2018 *Taiwan Travel Act* allows senior-level US officials to visit Taiwan and vice versa. In May 2019, US and Taiwanese national security chiefs met in Washington for the first time in more than forty years. In July 2019, Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen visited New York and Colorado while officially in transit to the Caribbean. She met with a state governor, UN ambassadors from Taiwan's diplomatic allies and members of the US Congress. These meetings were unprecedented. Another first was joint Taiwan–United States cyber exercises in 2019. They were aimed at foreign actors without singling out the PRC but were clearly a response to PRC cyberattacks. In August 2020, the Secretary of Health and Human Services became the highest-ranking US official to visit the island since 1979.

Biden has not veered far from Trump's policies. New guidelines encourage US officials to meet their Taiwanese counterparts. Biden has not ended the deployment of US special forces to conduct training in Taiwan. He blessed an agreement for US and Taiwanese coastguards to increase cooperation. He invited Taipei's top representative in the United States to his inauguration and allowed the US ambassador to Palau to visit Taiwan with the president of the Pacific country, both unprecedented moves. Biden, too, approved a robust arms package for Taiwan in August 2021.

The United States dropped all pretenses about its intentions regarding Taiwan when a US defense official said in December that Taiwan is strategically “critical to . . . the defense of vital US interests in the Indo-Pacific”. This Senate testimony by Assistant Defence Secretary Ely Ratner is the first public statement by a serving US official that makes clear what PRC officials in private have said for decades: that despite repeated assurances to the contrary the United States opposes unification, even if it takes place without coercion.

Beijing sternly rebuked each of these actions and statements. But the Biden administration has not shied away from backing Taiwan and openly drawing allies’ and partners’ attention to Taiwan’s isolation and predicament.

Japan, too, has implemented more practical cooperation with Taiwan. Informally, there have been close ties between the two for years, both at the societal level and between their militaries. Although remarks by Japan’s Minister of Defence Nonuo Kishi that “the peace and stability of Taiwan are directly connected to Japan” do not indicate a fundamental change in policy, as some media reports stated, they do reflect a shift in the Japanese government’s willingness to publicly express support for Taiwan.

Even Canberra’s previously timid attitude has changed. Australia has joined the chorus of voices expressing support for strengthening ties with Taiwan, a “critical partner” and a “leading democracy”. Prime Minister Scott Morrison, previously careful to refer to Taiwan as an “economy” or a “jurisdiction”, has referred to Taiwan as a “country”

many times since May 2021 and emphasised that it is “a country that has done extraordinarily well”. Considering the tense relations between Canberra and Beijing, the Australian government appears to have concluded that it does not have much to lose by following Washington’s lead on Taiwan.

All of this increases Beijing’s anxiety that the United States, Japan, Australia and others are eroding its adamant stance that Taiwan is not a country.

What will Xi do next?

How will Xi go about ensuring that “the historical task of the complete reunification of the motherland . . . will definitely be fulfilled”?

The answer requires a word of caution. However unlikely it seems now, the possibility of the governments in Beijing and Taipei striking a deal to resolve Taiwan’s political status cannot be ruled out. Few foresaw the demise of the Soviet Union. Anyone would have laughed in 1988 at the thought of Ukraine’s future foreign policy challenges. The myriad of problems facing the PRC, coupled with an increasing disdain among PRC middle classes and elites for Xi’s authoritarian measures, means one cannot completely dismiss the possibility of upheaval within the CPC, or even in the PRC itself.

If Taiwan’s economy were to drastically falter, for whatever reason, and be on the brink of collapse, a Taiwanese leader could conceivably negotiate a symbolic but unified “Greater Chinese Union”. It would be even more likely if Washington were to withdraw its support for

Taiwan, or if Taiwan's leaders seriously questioned the United States' reliability – as some observers post-Afghanistan have opined that they should – and deemed that Washington was not prepared to suffer body bags in a war over Taiwan.

One possible unification model would be for each entity to retain its system of government – in essence, functioning separately as they do today – and secure international safeguards for the demilitarisation of Taiwan. The leaders within this “Greater Chinese Union” would convene an annual meeting, rich with symbolism, to cherish Chinese civilisation. Ultimately, the so-called

Taiwan problem is about the symbolism of sovereignty. Taiwan would be allowed to participate in the UN General Assembly and its sub-organisations via its own representative as part of a “Greater Chinese Union” delegation. The

PRC would achieve a reunification of sorts and Taiwan would break out of its international isolation. This solution – which I spelt out with Gareth Evans in a 2004 report for the International Crisis Group – is utopian in today's cross-Strait climate. It would, of course, dramatically transform the region's geopolitics.

Now to the question of how Xi could ensure that he becomes the PRC leader credited with unifying the mainland and Taiwan. Despite the recent barrage of statements by elected leaders, for example Peter

The campaign could start ominously but relatively innocuously

Dutton, warning of imminent war, a catastrophic military conflict is not the route Xi is most likely to choose. Just as Xi's warnings that the PLA will use force if necessary to deter Taiwan's independence are credible, so are his statements that unification by peaceful means is his preference. In a clear message to the alarmists, Xi used unprecedented language to underline the preferred avenue to unification in his virtual meeting with Joe Biden in November: "We have patience and will strive for the prospect of peaceful reunification with utmost sincerity and efforts."

The costs and risks to the PRC of any full-scale war in the Taiwan Strait would be enormous. Anything short of complete victory and unification would be disastrous for the CPC. War is not in Xi's interest.

Military conflict cannot be ruled out. A crisis arising from an accidental clash between aircraft or vessels could spiral out of control but is unlikely.

A more likely scenario is a protracted and intensive PRC campaign using "all means short of war" to force the Taiwanese leadership to start negotiating premised on the precondition that it acknowledges that there is only "one China". Taiwan has hitherto insisted that it is willing to hold political talks with Beijing but only as an equal without preconditions. However, Taiwan has de facto stipulated its own preconditions, namely that the PRC abandon its threat of force and accept that the future of Taiwan must be decided by its 23 million people.

'Measures short of war' is a term traditionally used to describe all ways and means available to achieve strategic objectives without crossing

the line into major conventional (or nuclear) confrontation. In other words, violence is used as a tool to shift popular support to achieve political ends rather than as a tool to defeat another country's military forces.

In an attempt to break Taiwan's will, Beijing could adopt an aggressive mix of new technologies and conventional methods. These range from intimidation via economic pressure or a partial embargo, cyber-attacks, disinformation operations and covert actions of political interference and subversion, to assassination and the limited use of military force. Once political talks have started, 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 complete unification, a central tenet of the "China Dream".

How to break Taiwan's will without all-out war

In this scenario, the PRC would not invade Taiwan. Rather, Beijing would strive to create utter chaos in Taiwan and compel the government in Taipei to accept the one China principle and negotiate a future unification model. In the beginning, it would be impossible to pinpoint who was behind the destabilising actions. Few shots would be fired other than for possible political assassinations. Taiwan's armed forces would struggle to counter Beijing's actions. The United States and others would find it difficult to assist Taiwan other than by strongly condemning Beijing.

No single action by the PRC would warrant a military response by Taiwan or the United States. The campaign could start ominously but relatively innocuously. For example, mainland Chinese officials would

gather major Taiwanese investors in the PRC (known for their support of maintaining friendly ties to Beijing) and insist that they sign a letter calling on Taiwan's president to open cross-Strait political talks. Refusal to sign would result in business difficulties, the investors would be told. The Beijing government would at the same time send a letter to the Taiwanese "leader" calling for immediate consultations to address political differences and establish ways to work together towards reunification. On the same day, Beijing could suddenly cut Taiwan's air routes to PRC cities drastically, stating that foreign airlines needed those routes. International airlines would be told to choose between flying to the PRC or Taiwan. PRC combat aircraft would go further than on current missions and violate Taiwanese air space.

Taiwan's stock market could be expected to plunge. PRC-backed media outlets would run scare campaigns. Some groups would demand a formal declaration of independence; others would demand that the government open talks with Beijing. Protesters would take to the streets. Confrontations between opposing political groups could become violent, and police would be forced to use tear gas to disperse crowds. Gangs could attack independence supporters.

In this scenario, the PRC would next launch a barrage of sophisticated cyber-attacks with the aim of first disrupting, then shutting down electricity and telecommunications on the island. At the same time, the PLA would initiate extensive military exercises. A flotilla of PLA Navy ships would sail close to Taiwan's coast. During the live-fire portion of missile exercises near Taiwan, one of the missiles would "stray"

off course and cause civilian casualties in Taiwan. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of unarmed PRC fishermen would make their way across the Strait on a “Mission of Friendship to Promote Reunification”, trusting that Taiwan’s armed forces would not open fire and slaughter unarmed people en masse. Some of the fishermen – many of them paramilitary in disguise – would be “invited” ashore by Taiwanese who support Beijing. Cut-off from communications, rumours of the PRC’s intentions would run wild through Taiwan’s darkened cities. The PLA Navy would start operations to impose a partial blockade of the four harbours on the west coast of Taiwan. Beijing would demand other governments shut their representative offices in Taipei. At the end of a period of intensive pressure, the *People’s Daily* would publish an editorial encouraging Chinese brethren in Taiwan to carefully assess their interests and make the right decision, warning that the clock is ticking.

By dismissing the eternal status quo, Xi has taken a big gamble

The determination of Hong Kong residents in the face of formidable pressure stands as a reminder that human willpower should not be underestimated. However, it is impossible to predict how resilient the Taiwanese people under siege would be. There are simply too many unknown variables: What would be the role of Taiwanese who favour unification in this scenario? What proportion of pro-unification Taiwanese would act as proxies for the PRC? Of the population,

1.9 per cent (which translates into 444,000 Taiwanese) want unification as soon as possible, according to a September 2021 survey by Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council. Approximately 5 per cent (1.2 million people) favour the status quo for now and want unification later. Although these pro-unification individuals represent a small minority, their actions could be decisive.

How many Taiwanese would, amid an intense and frightening crisis, prefer that their government negotiate a compromise to avoid an escalation of violence? After all, in this scenario, the Beijing government would time and again remind Taiwanese that all it is asking for is a commitment from Taiwan's leaders to negotiate.

When will Xi make a move?

When could Xi launch an exhaustive pressure campaign using “all means short of war”?

The state of the PRC economy will be a decisive factor, as will the state of PRC–United States relations and Xi's own political standing. Some observers predict that the dissatisfaction across PRC society stemming from serious energy shortages will prompt Xi to use a Taiwan crisis in the near future to divert attention. That is unlikely.

It is more likely that the next inflection point will be Taiwan's presidential election in 2024. Political pressure on Xi to make progress toward his stated goal of “reunification” will intensify after that. He has backed himself into a corner and could feel compelled to act decisively if the next Taiwanese president is an openly pro-independence

leader who, contrary to Tsai, intentionally stirs up nationalist emotions among Taiwanese. It is hard to imagine the seven members of the CPC Politburo – the PRC’s most powerful political body – convincing themselves that time is still on their side if a steadfast independence proponent such as Tsai’s current vice-president, William Lai, is elected. CPC leaders cannot indefinitely ignore the trend that as older generation mainland-born Taiwanese die, the proportion of Taiwanese who feel strongly about their separate identity and democracy grows.

Before the twenty-first Party Congress in late 2027, Xi could decide that he needs to display strength to maintain his grip on power. That is also the year that the CPC has decreed the PLA should be a fully modern military. The PLA needs to be ready if a concerted pressure campaign using all “means short of war” suddenly turns into a military conflict. This is entirely possible.

A key question for which there is no definitive answer is whether Xi Jinping has put unification above other national priorities. Thus far he has not, and he continues to send mixed signals about his intentions, such as his remarks about peaceful unification to Joe Biden in November.

By dismissing the eternal status quo, Xi has taken a big gamble. If war breaks out across the Taiwan Strait, the ensuing devastation will stymie economic development and crush people’s hopes for a more prosperous tomorrow in the PRC. That, too, is central to Xi’s legacy and CPC legitimacy. Xi might well regret not taking Deng Xiaoping’s advice: “Achieving national unification is the nation’s wish, if not unified in 100 years, then unified in 1000 years.” ■