

Future War: Taiwan

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IN LAST week's U.S.-Chinese war over Taiwan, the president was propelled towards conflict by strategic miscalculation, rather than a bold defense of a popular but geopolitically dispensable ally, according to a senior administration official. The president had hoped to repel China's rising bellicosity with a show of force, rather than the actual use of force. After Beijing responded by ratcheting up tensions in the Taiwan Strait, both sides feared that a subsequent climb-down would damage their global credibility and leadership, the official said.

In addition, Washington misread Taiwan's own perceptions of its national interests, according to a Western diplomat stationed in Asia. Taiwan's ruling party saw its opportunity to assert itself vis-à-vis Beijing rapidly waning, and believed it had to be claimed. Washington's intelligence deficit regarding Taipei's leadership further undermined its ability to anticipate and therefore control events, and contributed to the spiraling of tensions.

"The national security advisor from the start recommended military force, arguing that China had dangerous expansionist ambitions. He argued that China's rapacious consumption of the world's raw materials was a liability. He said China had become a strategic, economic and cultural rival", said the senior administration official, who declined to be identified. "The secretary of state argued against that. He pointed to the technical advantages Beijing had gained since the European Union relaxed its moratorium on arms sales. The president opted for a third-way approach between a military response and diplomatic maneuvering, hoping to intimidate Beijing by flexing some military muscle in the Taiwan Strait. It ended up being a third way to war."

According to the Western diplomat, Beijing had accurately read the president's reluctance to resort to military action but, like the president, underestimated the potential for war as a result of escalation. And both Washington and Beijing failed to accurately assess tempers in Taipei.

After Taiwan's president last Monday sought an amendment to his country's constitution to change the country's name from the Republic of China to the Republic of Taiwan, the White House did not see war anywhere in the offing, said the senior official. Beijing's shrill statement in response was expected to dampen Taiwan's enthusiasm for independence, particularly Beijing's characterization of Taiwanese government officials as "separatist traitors." The statement also said, "We urge our Taiwan compatriots to

repudiate this irresponsible leadership before it is too late. The People's Republic of China has said repeatedly that it wants to settle the issue of Taiwan's reunification by peaceful means. Some provocations are simply intolerable, however."

After Taiwan appeared undeterred, the United States shared with Taiwan satellite data, showing extensive activity at Chinese military airfields directly across the strait from Taiwan, the official said. In addition, U.S. officials pointed out that China had more than 1,200 missiles targeting the island.

The secretary of state urged the president to issue a statement reiterating Washington's long-standing position against any unilateral changes in the status quo by either Taipei or Beijing and explicitly condemning the proposal to change Taiwan's constitution, according to the official.

At that point, the president was under significant congressional pressure to stand up to Beijing's confrontation, particularly from the House majority leader. The president instead issued a statement mildly critical of the Taiwanese proposal. The official said Washington was blindsided by Taiwan's blunt rejection of the U.S. criticism. "It is up to the people of Taiwan to decide whether to change the name of our country to the Republic of Taiwan. The communist authorities on the mainland have nothing to say about it, and even a friend like the United States has no right to interfere in the affairs of a sister democracy", said Taiwan's foreign ministry in a statement.

IN HINDSIGHT, Taiwan's position should have been anticipated by Washington, said the Western diplomat in Asia, in a telephone interview. Taipei had been increasingly convinced that going on the offensive was its best defense, given Taiwan's deteriorating geopolitical circumstances. Beijing's strategy of isolating Taipei had been successful. By the time Taiwan's government proposed the constitutional change, it was recognized by just 16 countries. Taiwan's leaders may have thought that they had nothing to lose by being bold, since the alternative was inexorable diplomatic extinction, the diplomat said.

Also, the changing military balance may have also encouraged the belief that it was "now or never", the diplomat added. China had been purchasing cutting-edge weapons from Russia for years, and from the European Union since it dropped its moratorium on arms sales to Beijing. Meanwhile, Taiwan had starved its defense budget, choosing instead to spend money on domestic priorities. The balance in 2013 was still uncertain, but time clearly was not on Taiwan's side.

"Officials in Taiwan also believed that brinkmanship would ultimately bring America to its defense", the diplomat said. "Taipei has long thought it could depend on the assurances of the TRA", referring to the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act. Although America's obligations under the TRA are not a clear-cut defense commitment, the law does require the United States to sell Taiwan defensive arms and to regard any PRC use of force as a grave breach of East Asia's peace. The latter provision seems to suggest that the United States would use its own military forces to defend Taiwan.

It was after the House majority leader introduced a resolution expressing support for Taiwan's right to make changes in its constitution and affirming that the United States would "take all necessary actions including the use of force to repel aggression in the Taiwan Strait" that the White House felt compelled to head off additional congressional action in support of Taiwan that could further push the United States towards a war footing, said the senior official. After more than forty cosponsors signed on to the resolution, the president announced that he was redeploying the two aircraft-carrier battle groups of the USS John C. Stennis and the USS Ronald Reagan to "waters near Taiwan." The senior official said that at that point, the president again urged Taipei to put the proposed constitutional change on "indefinite hold."

The president's move did not quiet the hawks, though. On Thursday, the Weekly Standard published an article that was cited on the House floor:

The experience of the 1930s taught us that free nations make a colossal blunder when they attempt to appease totalitarian aggressors. The president should state unequivocally that if China attacks Taiwan, it means war with the United States. Faced with such a clear and determined policy, Communist China will back down, especially since its military forces are no match for America's. If the gang of thugs in Beijing persist in their saber rattling, the United States should respond by threatening to abandon the one-China policy and recognize Taiwan's independence. If Beijing insists on disrupting the peace of East Asia, China's communist rulers need to know that they could lose far more than they anticipate.

Meanwhile, the Taiwan resolution was moving rapidly through the House of Representatives, reinforcing the impression that the calls for war could spiral out of control if the president appeared complacent. During the floor debate, a number of House members--mainly conservative Republicans, but including many liberal Democrats--rose to praise Taiwan's democracy and to denounce what they described as the PRC's belligerent military posture, dismal human rights record and flood of Chinese imports that caused America's chronic bilateral trade deficit. Only a handful of representatives urged caution, warning that precipitous action could derail a crucial U.S. economic and political relationship and suggesting that going eyeball to eyeball with a nuclear-armed nation risked catastrophe.

The congressional tsunami of hostility toward the PRC was rising precipitously. The business leaders that pointed to America's nearly \$350 billion-a-year relationship with the PRC were accused by lawmakers of being willing to sacrifice America's honor and values to protect the profits of corporations. "After the business community was shouted down, it became clear to the president just how difficult it was going to be to quell the growing nationalist fervor", said the senior official.

Beijing's next move dramatically heightened tensions in Washington. On Friday, China's naval and ground forces attacked and quickly occupied the offshore islands of Kinmen and Matsu. Taiwan's president called on the United States to honor the provisions of the TRA. "It is clear that the goal of China's communist regime is to subjugate free and

democratic Taiwan. America needs to take decisive action to repel this aggression or its credibility will be destroyed."

WASHINGTON NOW faced in reality the hypothetical scenario that the Eisenhower Administration had agonized over during the Formosa Strait crises in the 1950s, when President Eisenhower considered how he should respond in the event that the PRC ever conquered the offshore islands but did not launch an assault on Taiwan itself. Fortunately, China had never escalated matters to the point where Eisenhower was forced to make a decision. The current administration faced no such luxury, and it was as badly divided as the Eisenhower Administration had been about an appropriate response, said the official. Ultimately, the president split the suggestions down the middle when he announced he was sending another battle group, led by the USS Abraham Lincoln, to join the Stennis and the Reagan, but refrained from taking military action against PRC forces.

After the PRC defense ministry responded to the deployment of the battle groups by announcing that it was imposing a blockade on "the renegade province of Taiwan" and warned all ships to refrain from approaching Taiwanese ports, the president began to appreciate how resolute Beijing was going to be, and how dangerous the momentum towards conflict had become, the official said.

The president still believed, though, that a united front among U.S. allies in Asia could dissuade Beijing from further aggression, he said. South Korea sent a salvo against that assumption Thursday, when its embassy in Washington said that "as a result of its persistent pursuit of the Sunshine Policy and diplomatic endeavors with China, tensions in Asia were at an all-time low." The statement said that when the president made his previously scheduled trip to Asia, Washington's "misunderstanding" with Beijing "would be cleared up." South Korea's government not only refused to join any U.S. military action against the PRC, it forbade the United States from using its own military bases in the Republic of Korea for such purposes.

In Japan, meanwhile, the mobilization of business leaders prevented the prime minister from backing Washington in the escalating confrontation with Beijing, the diplomat said. Tokyo also refused to allow the United States to use its military facilities on Japanese territory for operations against PRC forces. Washington reacted angrily, pointing out that Japan's de facto declaration of neutrality violated the spirit of the security statement adopted by the two governments in February 2005, declaring that a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan dispute was a crucial security interest of both countries. Japan's renegeing on that commitment, U.S. officials warned Tokyo, endangered the future of the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

There was considerable sympathy for Taiwan among the Japanese public as well as the country's political elite, but the business community successfully fanned fears of China's economic and military retaliation for Japanese support of U.S. military action. Other governments throughout East Asia followed suit, declaring their neutrality in any armed conflict between the United States and China, favoring their growing political and economic ties with Beijing.

The missiles that China fired on Saturday had been part of its arsenal of 1,200 missiles, which it had been amassing for the past two decades. Military experts estimate that the initial barrage consisted of fewer than one hundred missiles, and Taiwan's missile defense system intercepted more than 80 percent of them. The physical damage inflicted by the warheads that reached their targets was quite modest, experts said, but the economic and psychological impact was considerable.

Washington was still measuring what its response should be when Taiwan's air and naval forces responded initially by attacking PRC surface vessels and waging aerial dogfights over the strait, and subsequently launching air strikes on Chinese missile batteries on the mainland. Military experts estimate that China's second barrage was probably about twice as large as its first.

NEITHER U.S. nor diplomatic sources have been able to ascertain who fired the first shot in the conflict between U.S. and Chinese forces in the Taiwan Strait on Sunday. The United States apparently did not expect China to conduct its comprehensive campaign of electronic warfare to disrupt U.S. communications and launch several anti-satellite weapons that knocked out two key U.S. spy satellites--a capability it had acquired due to the relaxation of EU sanctions on arms sales. Those tactics neutralized the advantage that the United States had enjoyed in every conflict since the Gulf War of being able to see and manage the battlefield far better than any adversary.

It was the subsequent Chinese missile assault on the Reagan and its support ships that ignited the fury of those national security advisors that had long been advising the president to take bold military action. U.S. inaction had cost the country three ships, while four had been damaged in the first hours of the battle, they noted. After China's coordinated attack, deploying a new generation of Advanced Sunburn missiles, struck the Reagan itself, calls for decisive retaliation become overwhelming. The loss of the Reagan shocked the American public, since the aircraft carriers were widely seen as virtually invincible.

By the time U.S. forces in the western Pacific were already in action--with planes from the Stennis and the Lincoln attacking PRC aircraft over the strait and supporting Taiwanese air strikes on airfields and other military installations on the mainland--sources in Washington and Asia indicated that both the United States and the PRC had put their strategic nuclear forces on maximum alert.

At a White House meeting following the sinking of the Reagan, several members of the president's national security team were in favor of escalation, advocating an attack on military and infrastructure targets throughout the PRC, said the official. That action would have required far more air power than the United States had available from the two remaining carriers. The Joint Chiefs of Staff urged the president to order the fleet of B-2 bombers from the continental United States into action, said the official. Those planes would focus on the government compound in Beijing as well as selected targets in China's prized economic jewel, Shanghai. Some officials also recommended that the United States launch attacks from its bases in South Korea and Japan, regardless of the disapproval of host governments.

Other members urged caution. The secretary of defense pointed out that China had more than 200 nuclear warheads mounted on intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching any target in the United States. If the United States started bombing Beijing and Shanghai, there was no estimating where the cycle of escalation would stop. An all-out war between the United States and China, potentially involving the use of nuclear weapons, was conceivable.

The president opted against further escalation. A similar process of fear-induced restraint apparently occurred within the PRC government. In the ceasefire that emerged this week, China agreed to stop its bombardment of Taiwan and to lift the blockade, while the United States agreed not to challenge PRC control of the offshore islands and to withdraw its forces from the strait. Beijing also agreed to redeploy its forces to the western half of the strait, if Taiwan redeployed its forces to the eastern half. Although those moves formed the basis for the ceasefire, the diplomat in Asia said that China had made other behind-the-scene demands. U.S. insistence on the resignation of the Taiwanese leader and the opening of talks on reunification were made at Beijing's behest, she said.

Taiwan's new president, who comes from the more pragmatic wing of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), will reluctantly accommodate Beijing's demands, said the Western diplomat. Taipei had hinged its aspirations for independence on U.S. military protection, but that protection has proved insufficient. Given the damage the United States had suffered in the confrontation with China, Washington's military protection will likely be even less reliable in the future, particularly under the current administration. Even many DPP stalwarts appear convinced that Taiwan's dream of internationally recognized independence is now not achievable. The island's remaining strategy appears centered on stalling reunification negotiations for as long as possible and striking the best deal available, she said.

Although Beijing has secured many of its objectives in the crisis, reunification talks could drag on for more than a decade, according to analysts, and if reunification is finalized, it may entail a loose confederation between Taiwan and the PRC. Clearly, China has paid an extraordinarily high price for those gains.

In both the House and the Senate, the proposed Anti-Aggression Act of 2013 appears poised for swift passage, mandating not only the severing of diplomatic ties, but also a total embargo on commerce with the PRC and a ban on U.S. investment in China. A rupture in the U.S.-China relationship could do serious damage to the American economy and the global economy generally, and would have a devastating effect on China's economic health, U.S. and Chinese economists have said.

Many experts are now pointing to a new era: Sino-American cold war and competition for strategic and economic advantage throughout East Asia. Analysts will surely be estimating in the weeks and months to come the far-ranging fallout of the war over the status of one small island.