

China's conniptions with Taiwan

by GWYNNE DYER

China has been having conniptions again.

President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan had a courtesy meeting last week with the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Kevin McCarthy. Beijing reacted by issuing a 'stern warning' to the United States, and then 'encircled' the island (its own words) with Chinese fighters, bombers, naval destroyers and missile boats.

Kevin McCarthy? Who he? Yes, he sort of controls the U.S. House of Representatives, but that is currently in the hands of the Republican Party, and thus has no power to shape the actions of the U.S. Government.

As for the man himself, he only won the Speakership on the 15th ballot, the first time since 1923 that the post was even contested. He made such concessions to win support that he is effectively hostage to his own party's extreme right. He is the walking embodiment of powerlessness.

McCarthy's glancing encounter with President Tsai was staged in California, not in Washington DC, in order not to ruffle China's feathers too much. But it didn't help. Beijing's response was along the lines of King Lear. (You know: 'I will do such things? What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be the terrors of the earth!')

China declared three days of military exercises designed to show that Beijing could conquer Taiwan at a moment's notice. As Chinese state media put it, the drills would 'simultaneously organise patrols and advances around Taiwan island, shaping an all-round encirclement and deterrence posture.'

What do they mean by that? 'Encirclement' means 'blockade', and 'deterrence' is about deterring the US Navy from trying to break that blockade. But it is just an expression of anger, not a statement of imminent strategic intent, nor even a demonstration of military capability.

In other words, we've heard it all before. We're hearing it more often now, in a louder voice, but that may just be due to the domestic Chinese political situation. China's ability to conquer Taiwan by military force has slowly improved over time, but is still far from assured.

That may be another reason, beyond mere anger at being defied, why Beijing stages all these pantomime military drills: to convince the Taiwanese government and its foreign friends that China already possesses a capability that it does not actually have.

This suggests two counter-strategies, one emotionally satisfying and the other practical.

The satisfying one would be to wear the Chinese regime down by monthly or even more frequent meetings between American and Taiwan officials. Kevin McCarthy hasn't much else urgent on his agenda, so he could do half of them himself.

Just like the recent one in California that triggered such sound and fury from Beijing, they needn't be about anything in particular. But every time, Beijing would feel obliged to respond, using up immense amounts of fuel and steadily losing credibility. 'I will do such things...'

However, one should avoid embarrassing people whenever possible, and backing them into corners would be just stupid. An unsuccessful Chinese invasion attempt against Taiwan would be almost as big a catastrophe as a successful one.

The right policy for the Biden administration would be to leave the high-profile meetings to publicity-hungry Republican politicians

(no more Nancy Pelosi farewell tours); to confine President Biden to murmured promises to defend Taiwan (promptly walked back into ambiguity by his entourage); and to concentrate on the military realities.

The dominant military reality in the region is that China's armed forces will have a fair chance of success if they invade Taiwan in about five years' time, at their current rate of growth, but only on two conditions. One is that neither China nor the United States uses nuclear weapons. The other is that Taiwan stays as weak militarily as it is now.

The former assumption is probably safe; the other is not. Taiwan's various governments used to have such high confidence in the American deterrent that they let the country's military spending fall until it was actually below Australia's on a per capita basis.

That was unwise. As Ukraine has demonstrated, US help does depend on a country being able to put up an effective defence itself. Taiwan's military spending is now rising rapidly, but it will be at least five years until it could hold out alone for more than a month.

If the two trends above unfold at similar rates in Taiwan and in China, there will never be a time when a Chinese invasion would be a militarily plausible undertaking. The primary US role should be to ensure that Taiwan urgently rebuilds its military defences, ignoring all Chinese threats and imprecations.

Avoiding a Chinese-American war should be the highest strategic priority for both countries, and this, paradoxically, would be the most valuable US contribution.